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## ABSTRACT

A current initiative at many institutions is the formation of "learning communities" that link or cluster courses around an interdisciplinary theme and enroll a common cohort of students. This study examined the attitudes and perceptions of students, faculty and administrators who were involved in a learning community to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the experience. The findings include: (1) the learning communities program should find more stable leadership and an administrative home in the institution; (2) linked or clustered models adapt well to the learning communities' initiative at the community college; (3) there is a need for a campaign to inform students, faculty and administrators about learning communities; (4) to improve communication, meetings must be held between the chief administrator and participating faculty and students to discuss program needs; (5) a "point person" should oversee registration and counseling issues, and counselors must be briefed prior to registration concerning the program offerings; (6) participating faculty should receive a stipend for their efforts in the program; (7) the program should further explore the use of adjunct faculty; (8) to recruit students, the institution needs to use peer mentoring and peer advising techniques; and (9) learning communities need to be linked or clustered with popular, general education courses and not solely with remedial courses. Appended are faculty guidelines for learning communities, the survey instruments, consent forms, interview questions, and verbatim responses. (Contains 76 references.) (AUTH/KP)

LEARNING COMMUNITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION:  
A FIELD OBSERVATION CASE STUDY

Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the  
School of Human Service Professions  
Widener University

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Education

by

Jane Weber

Center for Education

December 2000

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CASE STUDY

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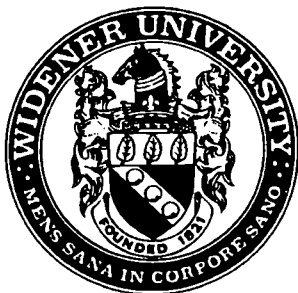
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Doctor of Education.**

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## **Abstract**

The formation of learning communities is a current initiative at many colleges and universities that links or clusters courses from several distinct areas of study. Learning communities organize students and faculty into smaller groups, encourage integration of the curriculum, and help students establish academic and social support networks. They also bring faculty together in more meaningful ways and help focus both faculty and students on learning outcomes (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). The learning community philosophy is different at every institution due to the individual and unique needs, purposes and goals of that institution. A review of the literature revealed minimal documented studies at institutions, especially community colleges, involved with learning communities on a smaller more cost efficient scale. The purpose of the study was to examine, through surveys, narratives and focus groups, the attitudes and perceptions of students, faculty and administrators that were involved in the learning communities' initiative, in order to determine what they viewed as the strengths and weaknesses of the experience. This qualitative study examined a linked, Reading III and Writing III learning community on the main campus, and a clustered, Reading III, Writing III, Basic Psychology learning community on the urban campus of a community college that is not an innovator in the learning communities' movement. The study participants were the students, faculty and administrators involved with the two learning communities initiatives at the community college during the spring 2000 semester. The student, faculty and administrative responses were examined for attitudinal patterns and themes emerging from their participation in the learning communities. A comparison was made between

the collected data and the conditions that must be satisfied to successfully implement a learning community. An examination of the collected data with the comparative conditions provided the researcher with suggestions to improve the current learning communities initiative at the community college, to broaden institutional support, and to increase student, faculty and administrative participation. The research data recommended that the learning communities program find more stable leadership and an administrative home in the institution. The institution should continue to use the linked or clustered models since they adapt well to the learning communities' initiative at the community college. There is a need for an extensive advertising campaign at the college to get the word out to students, faculty and administrators about learning communities. To improve communication, meetings must be held between the chief administrator and participating faculty and students in order to discuss program needs. A "point person" needs to be identified in the counseling office to oversee registration and counseling issues and counselors need to be briefed prior to registration concerning the learning community offerings. The data also recommended that the administrators and counselors visit learning community classes to observe the initiative first hand. The community college must continue to use the innovative faculty that selected to teach in the learning communities program. Participating faculty need to receive a stipend for their efforts in program. The data suggested that the institution should further explore the use of adjunct faculty in the learning communities' initiative. To recruit students the community college needs to use peer mentoring and peer advising techniques. Learning communities

need to be linked or clustered with popular, general education courses and not solely with remedial courses.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

A learning community is any one of a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses—or actually restructure the curricular material entirely—so that students have opportunities for deeper understanding of and integration of the material they are learning, and more interaction with one another and their teachers as fellow participants in the learning enterprise (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith, 1990, p.19).

The formation of “learning communities” is a current initiative in many colleges and universities that links or clusters courses from several distinct areas of study. This interdisciplinary approach to teaching is based on the concept that knowledge does not exist in isolated units, but that academic disciplines overlap and knowledge is interrelated. Therefore, the linking or clustering of courses affords the student the ability to obtain knowledge of a subject from several approaches. College personnel that are proponents of this philosophy indicate that students learn best when knowledge is presented from a variety of perspectives (Collison, 1993; Hill, 1985; Levine, 1998; Shapiro & Levine, 1999; Smith, 1991). The literature suggests (Gabelnick, et al, 1990; Levine, 1998; Smith, 1991) that many colleges and universities are investing time and money into the creation of “learning communities” on their campus. In recent years, there has been a steady increase in the number of learning communities programs and the attention given to them in the literature and at higher education conferences (Levine & Tompkins, 1999). Further, the creation of an environment for learning excellence is of prime concern for our institutions of higher education. Several key factors surface when the techniques, processes and elements of successful learning environments are examined. A positive learning environment stresses active and participatory learning,

relevant and worthwhile experiences, critical or higher-level thinking, application of learning and attention to diverse learning styles (Harper-Marinick & Story, 1994). The learning community initiative is one response to the creation of an environment for learning excellence. The learning community structure varies from linking existing courses for a cohort of students where faculty do not coordinate their curriculums, to a restructuring of the curriculum with integrated programs which faculty plan together and team teach (Harper-Marinick & Story, 1994). Nancy S. Shapiro and Jodi H. Levine (1999) state that the main characteristics of a successful learning community include:

- Organizing students and faculty into smaller groups
- Encouraging integration of the curriculum
- Helping students establish academic and social support networks
- Providing a setting for students to be socialized to the expectations of college
- Bringing faculty together in more meaningful ways
- Focusing faculty and students on learning outcomes
- Providing a setting for community-based delivery of academic support programs
- Offering a critical lens for examining the first-year experience (p.3)

First, all learning communities organize faculty and students into smaller groups that can facilitate student socialization. Students are co-registered in a defined set of course offerings. Students develop academic and social support networks both in and out of the classroom environment (Barefoot, Fidler, Gardner, Moore, & Roberts, 1999; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). Teachers get to know their students and students have an opportunity to establish study groups and friendships. Students are more at ease when

speaking in class, asking questions or seeking help from professors (Levine & Tompkins, 1999). Alexander Astin (1985) notes that learning communities help students overcome feelings of isolation. They “build a sense of group identity, cohesiveness, and uniqueness” (p.161). Learning communities provide an opportunity for students to develop a sense of student responsibility. Students are now responsible for the learning of a group and not just an individual. An important part of learning communities is that students learn from each other. Peers become partners in the learning process (Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

Another characteristic of learning communities is that they encourage greater faculty interaction. Faculty co-plan and spend time discussing their “teaching instruction, course content, student work, assessment and applications of technology” (Shapiro & Levine, 1999, p.5).

According to Gabelnick, MacGregor, Mathews, and Smith, (1990), in a broad sense learning communities restructure and integrate the curriculum “to link together courses or course work so that students find greater coherence in what they are learning” (p.5). Learning communities result in increased intellectual interaction between students and between students and faculty, and increased student involvement in learning. They have an impact on student intellectual development, retention, transfer, motivation and academic achievement (Smith, 1991). A learning community links or clusters courses in a way that is conducive for a more connected and enhanced teaching and learning environment (Levine & Tompkins, 1999). Students recognize that individual courses are

part of a larger, integrated learning experience rather than isolated courses required for graduation (Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

Not only does a successful learning community restructure the curriculum, it also involves changes in process (Smith, 1991; Smith 1993). The most important characteristic of learning communities is that they challenge the way students learn and the way teacher's teach (Levine & Tompkins, 1999). For example, team teaching, interdisciplinary content, integration of skill and content teaching, and active approaches to learning are used to provide a rich learning environment for both the students and professors (Smith, 1991; Smith 1993). Also, learning communities present a practical means for educational reform that address many of the new approaches to teaching and many diverse issues in varied institutional settings. For example, learning communities have attracted supporters of experimental learning, student-centered instruction, collaborative learning theory, the social-constructionists view of knowledge, and feminist theory (Smith, 1991).

Learning communities also provide a setting for academic support services to be brought to the students alleviating the need for students to locate separate offices across the campus. Academic advising, orientation, registration, career mentoring and tutoring can all be part of the learning community environment (Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

According to Spence and Campbell (1996), there are five indicators that a college or university is a learning community. First, the nature of conversation at the institution focuses on sharing ideas about teaching and, more importantly, learning. The college and university continuously investigate new ideas and innovations concerning student



learning. Also, an institution that is considered a learning community must have a professional development plan for faculty members. Funds are spent to develop a new curriculum, and learning changes are tied directly to the mission and vision of the college. Thirdly, the learning community college continuously reevaluates its mission, vision, and values. Next, in a successful learning community there is a use of alternative models of instructional delivery. Learning needs to be a constant part of the institution's focus. Finally, all systems in a successful learning community are self-correcting. The institution's desire is for student learning, and all systems strive to improve their own performance in this area (Spence & Campbell, 1996).

Several learning community models have been followed and adapted to fit the individual needs of an institution. Linked courses, learning clusters, freshman interest groups, federated learning communities, and coordinated studies are the five major types of learning communities that exist in various forms on our campuses (Gabelnick, et al, 1990; Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews & Smith, 1992; Hill, 1985; Smith, 1991). Recently, Gabelnick, et al (1990), condensed their number of models to three: paired or clustered courses, student cohorts in larger classes and team-taught programs (Levine, 1998; Love & Tokuno, 1999).

Regardless of the model, individual learning communities are organized around a set of flexible characteristics that create an integrated teaching and learning experience (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). "Learning communities are defined by the participants: those who put them together; those who live and learn in them, and those who mentor and

teach in them. Perhaps the best way to understand the essence of the learning community experience is to listen to the voices of those participants” (Shapiro & Levine, 1999, p.6).

### Statement of the Problem

During the past twenty years there has been much debate about America’s educational system. The report entitled, *A Nation At Risk*, which examined problems in the K-12 educational system, ultimately led to an examination of America’s post-secondary system. Through other state and national reports and the publishing of popular best-selling books on the topic of education, the public has become aware of a whole complex of issues besetting higher education today (Gabelnick, et al, 1990). According to Gabelnick, et al (1990), questions are being asked concerning the content of the curriculum, who is teaching undergraduate courses, and about how faculty spend their time at an institution. Further, other fundamental issues are being examined, such as, educational quality, declining standards, educational accountability and the organization of the higher educational system. Concerned individuals want to know why attrition rates are high, why students are not learning and why colleges and universities have failed some students (Gabelnick, et al, 1990). As early as 1985, Patrick Hill points out seven different issues that have beset our higher education system. First, he states that there is a mismatch between student and faculty expectations of what constitutes an undergraduate education. According to Hill, there are two damaging aspects of this mismatch.

One is the unrewarding and wasteful mismatch of a research-oriented, discipline-focused faculty with a career-oriented student body lacking

an academic heritage. The second central concern is the mismatch between a non-interventionist pedagogy with the fundamental passivity of the student body, which in large measure, is induced by our structures (p.3).

Hill also notes that there exists an inadequate amount of intellectual interaction between faculty and students and between students and students. In most institutions an interaction between faculty and students is limited to exams and term papers. Hill's third fundamental problem with higher education is the lack of coherence between most courses taken by students outside their major. Isolated courses, "deprive the student and the teacher of the widest system of coherent curricular support which would relate the fragmented disciplines to each other and reinforce the significance of what is being taught" (Hill, 1985, p.4). Further, Hill notes a lack of opportunities for faculty development at our institutions of higher education. Another problem with higher education is that our society is facing problems that no one discipline can solve.

According to Hill (1985), there is a "growing complexity and interdependence of the problems we face with our disciplines" (p.4). Hill's sixth problem with higher education deals with the non-completion rate of students which has reached alarming rates.

According to Tinto (1993), "More students leave their college or university prior to degree completion than stay. Of the nearly 2.4 million students who in 1993 entered higher education for the first time, over 1.1 million will leave higher education altogether, without ever completing either a two or a four year degree program" (p. 1). Finally, Hill addresses the problem with "shrinking budgets, a professional reward system, and internal patterns of resource allocation which reinforce and perpetuate the dominance of

all the previous six structural flaws” (Hill 1985, p.5). Since 1985 others have joined Hill in his concern for higher education.

In 1987, the Boyer report for the Carnegie Commission on higher education, *College: The Undergraduate Experience*, presented an analysis of the problems and potentials of America's colleges, and challenged colleges and universities to rethink their missions. This report was one of the first to cause debate concerning an undergraduate, general education curriculum. It addressed issues such as:

The discontinuity between K-12 schools and colleges, campus' confusion over missions and goals, the division between the liberal arts curriculum and the career-oriented vocationalism,...the forced choices faculty must make between research and teaching and between loyalty to their disciplines and loyalty to their institution, and the widening gap between the academic affairs community and the student affairs community (Shapiro & Levine, p.8).

The Boyer report also mentions the fragmentation of disciplines, and the need to redesign curriculum that integrates and makes connections across disciplines (Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

In 1997 the Kellogg Commission, in the report, *Return to Our Roots: The Student Experience*, challenged the National Association of State University and Land Grant Colleges to face a new role in American higher education. The commission challenged the institutions to examine “enrollment pressures, new competitors, funding difficulties and cost increases, eroding public trust, and limited institutional flexibility” (Shapiro &

Levine, 1999, p.11). The commission recommended that the colleges and universities become student-centered learning communities (Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

In 1998 the report, *Powerful Partnerships: A Shared Responsibility for Learning* was published by the Joint Task Force on Student Learning composed of representation from: the American Association of Higher Education, the American College Personnel Association, and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators. The task force advocated the need for new relationships between academic and student affairs, and the need for the higher education community to “share responsibility for learning” (Shapiro & Levine, 1999, p.8). The task force recommended that institutions of higher learning need to rethink campus structures (Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

To respond to some of the fundamental issues, higher education has had to make changes. Strommer (1999), notes that due to a number of powerful forces such as information technology, student needs, and business influences like Total Quality Management, higher education has had to shift instruction towards a focus on process, and active, collaborative learning (p.45). According to Barr (1995), there is a “paradigm shift” in our colleges and universities moving away from a focus on teaching to an emphasis on learning. In the traditional “instructor centered” paradigm the institution’s mission was to deliver instruction. Barr (1995) points out that the current “learner centered paradigm” emphasizes the production of “learning” and not instruction. According to this paradigm, institutions should utilize approaches such as collaborations that focus on learning. To implement a learner driven system requires reform in our institutions of higher education. As cited in Spence and Campbell (1996), George Boggs,

past president of Palomar College, California, was one of the first college leaders to set the challenges for all institutions to redefine their missions. He stated, “We need a new paradigm that defines community colleges as learning, not teaching institutions. The mission should be student learning, measured by learning outcomes. The most important people in our colleges are the learners. Everyone else is there to facilitate and support learning” (Spence & Campbell, 1996, p.26).

One strategy that has been used to respond to the problems in higher education and to bridge traditional institutions into “learner centered” institutions has been the learning community concept (Barr & Tagg, 1995). Harper-Marinick and Story (1994), define learning communities as,

a variety of curricular approaches for linking courses around a common theme or question. The main goal of learning communities is to provide students with a more coherent and enriched learning environment which allows them opportunities to integrate the material they learn through interactions with fellow students and their teachers. In learning communities, courses are treated as a connected whole rather than as isolated and unrelated offerings (p.2).

Angelo (1996) notes that, in the learning community, everyone has the responsibility to learn from and help everyone else. Within the learning community, faculty members become more the “designers of educational environment and experiences, and expert guides and facilitators” (p.1).

In response to the 1987 Boyer report, *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America*, higher education has introduced numerous student-centered curriculum innovations such as, collaborative learning, mentored-learning, experimental interdisciplinary courses and team-teaching. These strategies are all rooted in the current learning community model (Shapiro & Levine, 1999, p.71-72).

Further, Jean MacGregor (1987) indicates that learning communities do respond to many of the challenges facing higher education today:

1. The need for students to be engaged in more active learning and to have greater intellectual interaction with one another and with the faculty.
2. The need for faculty to have greater intellectual interaction with one another.
3. The need for less fragmentation and more coherence for students in the general education curriculum.
4. The need for college curricula to address issues which cross subject matter boundaries.
5. The need for students to understand diverse perspectives.
6. The need to stem the tide of student attrition in institutions.
7. The need for creative and low cost approaches to faculty development (p.1-2).

Although, the structure, names, and methods of implementation of learning community programs may vary from institution to institution, the literature reveals with overwhelming evidence that learning communities have “emerged as a practical, pedagogically sound concept for addressing the criticisms and challenges leveled at higher education today” (Shapiro & Levine, 1999, p.14).

### Purpose of the Study

The strengths and weaknesses of learning communities have been explored at numerous institutions around the country. Some of the forerunners in learning communities are: Evergreen State College, Washington; LaGuardia Community College, New York; The University of Washington; and Temple University, Pennsylvania. These institutions are either entirely organized around learning communities or have extensive learning community programs. Much quantitative data has been collected concerning these particular learning communities. There also has been some qualitative data collected at these institutions with extensive learning community initiatives and lucrative grant funding. However, the application of the learning community philosophy is different at every institution due to the individual and unique needs, purposes and goals of that institution. Therefore, the learning community initiative at each college and university will produce varying findings. The perspective of a student or faculty member participating in a learning community at a large university in Washington can be very different from the perspectives of a student or faculty member participating in a learning community at a medium-sized community college in New Jersey. The current literature (Gabelnick, et al, 1990; Gardner & Levine, 1999; Levine, 1998; Shapiro & Levine, 1999; Tinto & Goodsell, 1993) primarily examines institutions that are innovators in the learning community movement, and where the college mission supports the learning community concept. Further qualitative research needs to be conducted and studied from a variety of institutions of higher education in order to discover whether learning community projects in varied conditions yield similar results to institutions with



established learning community projects. Can the learning community initiative be successful at an institution with minimal financial and administrative support, and minimal faculty involvement? Will the qualitative data collected at a college that is just beginning to organize learning communities yield the same results as an institution with an established learning community model?

The purpose of this study was to observe the adaptation of a learning community, linked model, at a community college setting where learning communities are in their initial phase. The linked model is the simplest form of learning community. It involves the pairing of two courses and the listing of them in the class schedule so that a specific cohort of students' co-registers for the same courses (Gabelnick, et al, 1990). The researcher utilized surveys, narratives and focus group assessment tools to examine student, faculty and administrators' perceptions and attitudes concerning participation in the learning community initiative for the purposes of determining what they viewed as the strengths and weaknesses of the program. The student, faculty and administrative responses were examined for attitudinal patterns and themes emerging from their participation in the learning communities. The researcher then compared the qualitative findings from the community college to the conditions required for successful implementation of learning communities in order to determine what, if any, similarities and differences existed between the two. The compiled data provided information that could be used to suggest changes to the learning community initiative in order to increase institutional support, and student, faculty and administrative participation in the learning community program.

### Statement of the Research Questions

This study focused on the questions:

1. Who enrolls in learning communities?
2. Why do students enroll in learning communities?
3. How does participation in a learning community affect students' attitudes and feelings towards attending college?
4. What do students, faculty and administrators view as the strengths and weaknesses of learning communities?
5. How does teaching in a learning community affect faculty attitudes and feelings about teaching and learning?
6. Do faculty that teach in a learning community teach differently than in a traditional setting?
7. Can the learning community initiative be successful at an institution with minimal financial and administrative support and minimal faculty involvement?
8. Will the qualitative data collected at a college that is just beginning to organize learning communities yield similar student, faculty and administrative responses to established conditions for successfully implemented learning communities?
9. Does focus group assessment validate data collected from survey and narrative qualitative methods of assessment of learning communities?

10. What needs to be done to improve the current learning communities' initiative at the institution under study?
11. At an institution with minimal administrative support for learning communities, can the information that is gathered be used to broaden institutional support and increase student, faculty and administrative participation?

### Definition of Terms

Active Learning – Teachers serve as facilitators of learning rather than dispensers of knowledge. Active learning techniques include: small group projects, group discussions, role plays and interviews (Avens & Zelle, 1992).

Cluster Learning Community Model – An expanded form of the linked course model. Classes are scheduled so that a cohort of students enroll together in a cluster of courses following a common theme (Gabelnick, et al, 1990).

Collaborative learning – An instructional approach “designed to engage students actively in the learning process through inquiry and discussion with their peers in small groups” (Davidson & Worsham, 1992, p. xi).

Coordinated Studies Learning Community Model – This model, which falls under the heading of “team taught programs,” is the most radical of the learning community models because it changes the traditional curriculum. This model engages students and faculty full-time in interdisciplinary, active learning around themes. Faculty members teach exclusively in the team-taught coordinated program, and students register for the program as their entire course-load (Levine, Smith, Tinto & Gardner, 1999).

Federated Studies Learning Community Model – A more complex model that, like the Freshman Interest Group, is appropriate for student cohorts in larger universities. A cohort of students co-register for three “federated” courses linked by a common theme. In addition, the students enroll in a three-credit seminar. The seminar section is related to all three courses and is led by a Master Learner. The Master Learner is expected to become a learner and take all three federated courses with the students, plus convene the program seminars (Gabelnick et al, 1990; Hill, 1985; Lucas & Mott, 1996).

Focus Group Interviews- A focus group is a group interview conducted with 4-12 participants in a casual setting. A focus group moderator keeps the interview flowing and facilitates conversation in the group (Creason, 1991).

Freshman Interest Groups (FIG) – This model falls under the heading “student cohorts in larger classes” and is the creation of small freshman learning communities in a large university setting. In this simple and cost effective model, the students co-register for three courses and travel as a subset of approximately twenty-five students to larger classes. Most importantly, the FIG gives freshmen an immediate support system for their initial experience at a large university (Gabelnick, et al, 1990; Lucas & Mott, 1996).

“High ended” moderator involvement- The moderator in a focus group interview controls both the topic and group dynamics of the interview.

Learning Community – a curricular restructuring approach that links or clusters classes around an interdisciplinary theme and enrolls a common cohort of students (Levine & Tompkins, 1996).

Linked Course Learning Community Model – The simplest of the learning community models. The paired courses are listed together in the class schedule so that a specific cohort of students co-register for them. The faculty participating in a linked model teach individually but coordinate syllabi and assignments (Gabelnick, et al, 1990).

“Low ended” moderator involvement – The moderator in a focus group interview plays a minor role in the group discussion and tries to keep the interview as non-directive as possible.

Structured focus group interview – a type of focus group interview which, although flexible, is structured around particular questions with relative control of the group and discussion (Creason, 1991).

Unstructured focus group interview – an open-ended focus group technique where group discussion follows after the presentation of a very general statement (Creason, 1991).

### Organization of the Dissertation

There has been debate during the past twenty years about the quality of America's higher education system. One strategy that has been used to respond to the problems in higher education and to bridge traditional institutions into learner centered institutions has been the learning community concept (Barr & Tagg, 1995). The formation of learning communities is an initiative in colleges and universities that links or clusters courses from several distinct areas of study. Learning communities organize students and faculty into smaller groups, encourage integration of curriculum, bring faculty and students together in more meaningful ways, and help students establish academic and

social support networks (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). This qualitative study examined two learning communities at a community college that is not an innovator in the learning communities' movement. The researcher utilized the assessment tools of surveys, narratives and focus groups to study the attitudes and perceptions of students, faculty and administrators concerning their participation in a learning communities initiative in order to determine what they viewed as the strengths and weakness of their experiences. A thematic content analysis was used to analyze the data. A comparison was made between the collected data and the conditions that must be satisfied to successfully implement a learning community. The analysis provided the researcher with information that could be used to improve, broaden, and increase student, faculty and administrative support for the current learning communities initiative.

## Chapter 2

### Review of the Literature

#### Introduction

After a brief overview of learning communities, a review of the literature examined the history of learning communities, the various models that are implemented at colleges and universities today, and the successes and concerns of these models. The literature review examined student and faculty perspectives toward participation in learning communities. Further, the possible future of learning communities was explored.

The term “learning communities” refers to a variety of approaches including: linked courses, clusters, freshmen interest groups, federated learning communities and coordinated studies (Hill, 1985). Recently, the number of models has been condensed to three: paired or cluster courses, student cohorts in larger classes and team-taught programs (Levine, 1998). These basic models take on various forms directly related to the specific needs of the individual institutions. However, all the models address specific issues such as retention, integration of skills and content, student motivation and achievement, and intellectual development (Smith, 1991).

#### History of Learning Communities

The concept of learning communities is not new to higher education. The learning community ideals are well grounded in earlier educational traditions and also in contemporary educational movements. Learning communities are validated in recent

research and theory on cooperative learning, collaboration, critical thinking, the feminist theory, general education and the freshman year experience (Gabelnick, et al, 1990). However, the earliest roots of learning communities date back to the work of Alexander Meiklejohn and John Dewey in the 1920's (Gabelnick, et al, 1990; Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

Alexander Meiklejohn is considered the father of the learning community movement because of his concerns with the increasing fragmentation and specialization that was resulting in America's colleges and universities. He was particularly concerned about the relationship between the democracy and our educational system. Meiklejohn felt that the goal of higher education was to prepare students to live as responsible citizens in the world. He saw higher education as an important place where students both learned and practiced citizenship. His dream to restructure curriculum became a reality in 1927 when he instituted the Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin (Gabelnick, et al, 1990; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). The first learning community was a full-time, two year, lower division program focusing for the first year on Athens of Pericles and Plato, and the second year, on Modern America (Rudolph, 1962). Each civilization was studied through a discussion-centered format. The students were also required to connect ideas from the classroom with the "real world." (Gabelnick, et al, 1990). Meiklejohn's curriculum was a rejection of the popular elective system that permitted students to determine their own course of study. He felt that a unity of curriculum was achieved through a continuity of context. Even though his program was based on the great books, Meiklejohn was not a traditionalist in his views, but instead



was future directed (Gabelnick, et al, 1990). Meiklejohn is remembered for his insights into the importance of curricular coherence, structure and community. Although Meiklejohn intended to create an innovative program, the program eventually reverted back to a traditional course of study. Cited as an administrative failure the program was discontinued in 1932 (Meiklejohn, 1932; Rudolph, 1962).

However, this did not mark the end to Meiklejohn's innovative program. Thirty years later, in 1965, John Tussman, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley created a new program later described in his book, *Experiment at Berkeley* (1969) (Gabelnick, et al, 1990). Tussman, a former student of Alexander Meiklejohn, also felt that the curriculum needed to abolish courses and create a "program" curriculum. He felt that the college/ university system had abandoned liberal arts ideals and now emphasized individual specialization in the curriculum. This, to Tussman, had effected human understanding (Tussman, 1969). Tussman (1969) notes his dissatisfaction with curriculum specialization and the course:

The course forces teaching into small, relatively self-contained units.

Horizontally, courses are generally unrelated and competitive...

no teacher is in a position to be responsible for...the student's total educational situation. The student presents himself to the teacher in fragments, and not even the advising system can put him together again...

Horizontal competitiveness and fragmentation of student attention are limiting conditions of which every sensitive teacher is bitterly aware.

- But there is nothing he can do about it. He can develop a coherent

course, but a collection of coherent courses may be simply an incoherent collection. For the student, to pursue one thread is to drop another. He seldom experiences the delight of sustained conversations. He loves the life of a distracted intellectual juggler ( p.6-7).

In structuring the curriculum around programs, Tussman (1969) recreated a sense of community between faculty members. Faculty needed to collaborate on the context and purpose of the program. Tussman felt that his colleagues were involved in a creative process of restructuring curriculum (Gabelnick, et al, 1990; Jones, 1981; Love, 1999; Shapiro & Levine 1999). Participants in the program included five faculty members who were released from their normal teaching duties, and one hundred and fifty students. The curriculum was a variation of the Athens-American design used by Meiklejohn at the University of Wisconsin. Tusman focused on Greece, seventeenth century England and America (Tussman, 1969). Entering freshmen studied the same curriculum and were involved in writing, reading, lecture, and faculty-student conferences. Students participated in seminars held twice weekly, both with faculty and without (Tussman, 1969). Some of the major flaws in the program were that students failed to attend seminars, there was a high attrition rate, and there were difficulties in getting faculty to participate in the program (Tussman, 1969).

Also, in the late 1960's, Robert Edgar was a microbiologist at Cal Tech. It was during a series of sensitivity training workshops by Carl Rogers in 1967 that Edgar became engrossed in the ideas of humanistic psychology. He began to question his teaching and his relations with students. He spent the next two summers attending

personal growth exercises at the National Training Laboratories in Bethel, Maine. He was approached in 1969 to become the provost of the new, sixth college at the University of California, Santa Cruz called Kresge College. Edgar structured Kresge College around his newly shaped ideals. In a memo to Dean McHenry of the University of California, Edgar outlined his intentions for Kresge College:

To achieve this goal, I wish to leave as many decisions as possible to the newly forming college community. The community as a whole will create its own mechanisms for regulating collective activities. I would hope that these organizational structures would be creatively built to fill our felt needs and responsively change as our needs as a community change.... I believe that placing a high priority on enhancing the quality of interpersonal interactions in the college will result in an exciting, productive and creative learning community (Grant & Riesman, 1978, p.80).

In his memo, Edgar continued to outline an interdisciplinary curriculum that would “explore urgent social and environmental problems” (Grant & Riesman, 1978, p.81). Edgar hired Michael Kahn, a Harvard graduate who Edgar had met in one of Kahn’s personal growth workshops in Bethel, Maine. Kahn provided the leadership for Kresge’s emphasis in personal growth and the T-group process. T-groups were sensitivity training groups that students at Kresge College were required to take. Students met together for the purpose of exploring mutual feelings and interpersonal relationships. Kahn’s vision of Kresge College was to be “a community of real trust, a

caring community, a place where we took care of each other, looked out for each other, loved one another” (Grant & Riesman, 1978, p.86).

Kahn and Edgar spent much of their first planning year, 1970-1971, hiring new faculty. They hired only professors that were willing to participate in T-group sessions and retreats. Many critics of the Kresge experiment felt that the founding fathers were not interested in high academic standards. Both Kahn and Edgar disagreed, and although they wanted a special kind of community, they also wanted an intellectual environment. Kahn noted, “We wanted to build a pro-intellectual college where people cared about each other and where they weren’t playing sick competitive games” (Grant & Riesman, 1978, p.86). About twenty-five students registered in the first quarter and nearly forty were enrolled by the end of the year. It was an experimental year where faculty and students participated in a variety of T-groups, encounter styles, curricular planning and student-faculty retreats (Grant & Riesman, 1978).

By the fall of 1971, 275 students and 18 faculty members participated in the second year of Kresge College. Students and faculty were assigned kin groups, or “families” as they were originally called. Each kin group consisted of fifteen to twenty members, including a faculty advisor, who lived, worked, cooked and kept house in the same college environment. Of the thirteen kin groups formed in 1971, five disbanded, three continued for the year with reduced participation, and five continued at full strength mainly due to a strong academic focus (Grant & Riesman, 1978).

In the third year, Kresge College nearly doubled in size and its organizational structures were being tested. Many faculty were no longer interested in the core-course

curriculum and even Edgar felt that the innovative curricular structure had failed. By the fourth year the enrollment reached 590 students, but only 282 students lived on the campus. The majority of students were only loosely associated with the experiment. In order to keep the experiment alive, the founding fathers decided to create a special “corner of the college” for continuation of the Kresge experiment. Only residential students were permitted to participate. Politically, Edgar stepped down as provost and May Diaz, a Berkley anthropologist, was appointed which drew much criticism on the campus. As the Kresge experiment started to erode, a frequent complaint of the experiment was that the “goals of Kresge are damned hard to find and they have never been really decided upon, written up and publicized” (Grant & Riesman, 1978, p.123). Many critics felt that “the Kresge experiment had grown too fast and had lost most of its steam after the first year” (Grant & Riesman, 1978, p.123). Only a tenth of the experiment’s faculty were still enthusiastic about the project. Students, who basically only lived at Kresge began taking courses elsewhere on the Santa Cruz campus.

Further, in the 1970’s, the philosophies of both Meiklejohn and Tussman were followed at Evergreen State College to develop a state supported, “alternative college.” The founders decided to design the college around year-long learning communities called “coordinated studies” programs that were team-taught and developed around interdisciplinary themes (Gabelnick, et al, 1990; Jones, 1981). Mervyn Cadwallader, a founding dean at Evergreen State College emphasized the need for a curriculum grounded in the humanities and social sciences that would prepare students for success in a democratic society. After the third year of the coordinated studies program,

Cadwallader questioned whether the college should divide into a traditional branch and a coordinated studies branch. The faculty disagreed and Evergreen remained an institution entirely committed to a coordinated studies curriculum that is thriving at the institution today (Gabelnick, et al, 1990; Jones, 1981). Evergreen's successful curricular innovation increased interest at other institutions in the areas of collaborative learning and learning communities. Their approach has been a model for learning community variations in the 1970's, 1980's and 1990's (Gabelnick, et al, 1990; Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

John Dewey also influenced learning communities, not like Meiklejohn and Tussman with structure, but more with the teaching and learning process. Dewey was concerned with student-centered learning and active learning (Love, 1999). Although both Dewey and Meiklejohn were concerned with education and democracy, they had some major differences in philosophy. Dewey emphasized the individual, whereas, Meiklejohn favored the community. Also, Dewey was a pragmatist, whereas Meiklejohn was an idealist (Gabelnick, et al, 1990). According to Rudolph (1962), some of John Dewey's philosophies associated with progressive education and ultimately learning communities were:

individual programs to fit each student's needs, abilities, and interests; an insistence that each student, with the help of a competent advisor, take charge of his own education; an orientation toward contemporary society, the elevation of the theory and practice of fine arts to full curricular status, interdisciplinary courses, winter field periods somewhat reminiscent of Antioch extramural work program, wide student options; effective student

responsibility in student government and social affairs; a de-emphasis of such traditional practices as grades, examinations, degree criteria, and entrance requirements (Rudolph, 1962, p.476).

Dewey distinguished between traditional and progressive education by stating that “traditional education was ‘formation from without’ whereas, progressive education was ‘development from within’ and that institutions must build on the individuality of the student” (Gabelnick, et al, 1990, p.15). He felt that traditional teachers saw the student’s mind as a “piece of blotting paper that absorbs and retains automatically” with no attention to the context or the student (Gabelnick, et al, 1990, p.15). Dewey believed that this method of learning was ineffective and inaccurate for how people learn. According to Dewey, education requires a “shared inquiry” between teachers and students. Instead of just transmitting knowledge, the teacher is a partner in a cooperative relationship with the student. Education, according to Dewey, is an open ended inquiry and not teacher dominated. Dewey believed that education needed to be more purposeful and engage the student. He also criticized traditional education for its fragmentation of learning where a subject is learned in isolation. Ultimately, John Dewey influenced twentieth century thinking about teaching and learning. Dewey’s knowledge of the learning process has deeply effected the learning communities of today (Gabelnick, et al, 1990; Love, 1999).

Thus, two philosophies of education have come together to form the basis of learning communities. The Meiklejohn/Tussman and Kresge experiments have been important in structuring the curriculum of learning communities. Also, Dewey’s work in

the area of teaching and learning has provided learning community advocates with a wealth of theory. By combining these two philosophies, learning communities have become a viable way of dealing with many educational issues that exist in our colleges and universities today (Gabelnick, et al, 1990).

### Learning Community Models

Several models of learning communities have been adapted to fit the individual needs of an institution. Linked courses, learning clusters, freshman interest groups, federated learning communities, and coordinated studies are the five major learning community models that exist in various forms on our campuses. Recently, these models have been condensed to three models: paired or clustered courses, student cohorts in larger classes (freshman interest groups, federated learning communities) and team-taught programs (coordinated studies) (Levine, 1998; Love & Tokuno, 1999).

#### Linked course model.

The first model, linked courses represents the simplest of the learning community models. The paired courses are listed together in the class schedule so that a specific cohort of students co-registers for them. The participating faculty members in a linked model teach individually but do coordinate syllabi and assignments (Gabelnick, et al, 1990; Lucas & Mott, 1996). This model links courses that logically build on each other, such as, a skills course and a content course that promote curricular coherence (Smith, 1991). Some examples of linked courses are: Introduction to Public Speaking and American History, Beginning Calculus and College Physics, College Study Skills and Introductory Biology, Technical Writing and Introduction to Environmental Science,



Women and Fiction and Philosophy: Ethics (Levine, et al, 1999). At the University of Washington, students co-register for English Composition and any one of twenty-seven general education courses. Since the general education courses at Washington involve building skills, the linked courses are used to promote general education goals. The writing and general education courses carry equal credit. Some of the writing links include courses in biology, oceanography, geophysics, sociology, political science and art (Gabelnick, et al, 1990). The professors work to coordinate syllabi and/or assignments (Hill, 1985). The English Composition professor observes the content course lecture to gain familiarity with the instructors approach and course content (Smith, 1991). The faculty work together to generate writing ideas based on questions that develop in the lecture course. The writing course develops thinking and writing skills in the disciplinary content (Gabelnick, et al, 1990).

Shoreline Community College in Seattle, Washington has created a similar linked course effort that links English Composition with social science, natural science, and vocational courses. However, in this model, the faculty combines their classes and meets daily in a two-hour block (Gabelnick, et al, 1990).

The first year learning communities at Temple University feature linked course communities with core curriculum, general education courses, or introductory courses in majors. Pairs typically include a first year writing course, and some links include a freshman seminar (Levine, et al, 1999). Some examples of Temple's linked course learning communities are: PreCalculus and General Chemistry, American Women's Lives and English Composition, Introduction to Academic Discourse and Learning for

the New Century (Levine, et al, 1999). Some expanded linked learning communities exist on many campuses and feature students in a linked course community also enrolled in a freshman seminar course. For example, African-American History Since 1900 and College Composition plus a Freshman Seminar (Levine, et al, 1999).

#### Learning cluster model.

The learning cluster model is an expanded form of the linked course model. Classes are scheduled so that a group of students enroll together in a cluster of courses (3-4 courses) following a common theme. Again, the courses are scheduled and listed so that a specific cohort of students registers for the cluster (Gabelnick, et al, 1990; Love & Tokuno, 1999). The faculty work at integrating their course content with each other (Smith, 1991). However, there are varying degrees to which faculty integrate related materials in the cluster (Gabelnick, et al, 1990). According to Hill (1985), La Guardia Community College offers seven cluster opportunities per year. The “cluster team” reviews syllabi from previous clusters and discusses course descriptions and performance objectives. They share term paper suggestions, teaching approaches and pedagogical ideas. They also share intentions on text purchases and decide on avenues of communication. At the end of the semester the professors evaluate and make suggestions for future clusters. Clusters are evaluated each quarter and the evaluations are shared with the cluster faculty and their chairperson (Levine, et al, 1999). To graduate with an associate of arts degree, a student must take one of two semester clusters (Hill, 1985). The cluster entitled, “Freedom and Seeing” is a one semester, 11 credit cluster that includes the following courses: English 101 (3 credits), Writing The Research Paper (2

credits), Introduction to Philosophy (3 credits), and Introduction to Art (3 credits).

Another cluster entitled, “Work, Labor and Business in American Life” is a one semester, 11 credit cluster that includes the following courses: English 101 (3 credits), Writing the Research Paper (2 credits), Introduction to Social Sciences (3 credits) and Work, Labor and Business in American Literature (3 credits) (Gabelnick, et al, 1990; Levine, et al, 1999). The goals of La Guardia Community College are curricular coherence through reinforcement and the integration of ideas, and the understanding of issues that cross subject matter boundaries. These goals are met in a learning community environment that emphasizes thinking and writing skills (Gabelnick, et al, 1990; Gabelnick, et al, 1992; Hill, 1985).

At Western Michigan University, honor students participate in sets of three thematic, clustered courses. The cluster consists of two courses limited to twenty-five honor students and one large lecture course open to all students. Each semester the institution offers at least four clusters with participation of faculty from a dozen departments. For example, the cluster “Human Nature” includes Introduction to Biomedical Science, Thought and Writing and General Psychology (Gabelnick, et al, 1990). Another cluster at Western Michigan University is the cluster “Culture Myth and Folklore.” The students are a subset of a large anthropology class, Principles of Cultural Anthropology. The two other classes, Myth and Folk Literature and Myth and Ritual in Religion, are small honors classes (Levine, et al, 1999).

Babson College, a four-year, liberal arts college of management education, has developed a cluster model that links together one required freshman introductory

management course, one liberal arts course and one communications course (either speech or composition). The institution's model builds closer ties for the faculty and students between the liberal arts and business offerings of the college (Gabelnick, et al, 1990). Although each course in the cluster meets separately, there are shared meeting times and common assignments. Each cluster has ongoing faculty teaching seminars in which the faculty discuss pedagogy, teaching assignments and subject matter (Gabelnick, et al, 1990, p.24). An example of a twenty-student cluster is: "Law and Nature, Society and Language" which clusters General Management, Introduction to Philosophy and Speech (Gabelnick, et al, 1990).

Queens College has developed a three-course block learning community model in its freshman initiative program. Freshmen students co-register for English 110 with twenty students, Philosophy 101 with 40 students and a large sociology lecture course (Gabelnick, et al, 1990).

At Texas A &M, Corpus Christi, students participate in the "triad" learning community model. A large general education lecture class, Introduction to American Government (200 students) is clustered with another general education lecture class, U.S. History. The students are then divided into eight sections of English Composition and a Freshman Seminar, led by a graduate assistant (Barefoot, et al, 1999; Gabelnick, et al, 1990).

At the University of Texas, El Paso, all entering students in the area of Physical Science and Engineering enroll in one of three learning community clusters, Introduction to Physical Science and Engineering, Developmental Mathematics, and Freshman English;

Introduction to Physical Science and Engineering II, PreCalculus and Freshman English; or Physics 4210, Calculus or Freshman English (Levine, et al, 1999).

### Freshman Interest Groups.

The third model, Freshman Interest Groups (FIG) falls under the heading of student cohorts in larger classes, and is the creation of small freshman learning communities in a large university setting. This model links three courses around pre-major topics and has a peer-advising component. The students co-register for all three courses and travel as a subset of approximately twenty-five students to larger classes. This model is both simple and cost effective. Most importantly, the FIG gives freshmen an immediate support system for their initial experience at a large university. It is a vehicle for advising as well as for building social and academic community for freshmen (Gabelnick, et al, 1990; Gabelnick, et al, 1992; Love & Tokuno, 1999; Lucas & Mott, 1996). At the University of Oregon, where the Freshman Interest Group model originated, there are 17-20 triads of courses offered around “areas of interest.” One course is generally a writing or communications course with a lower enrollment. During the summer, freshmen are asked to choose a FIG from the extensive course offerings (Gabelnick, et al, 1990). For example, at the University of Oregon there is the Pre Law Interest Group for freshmen interested in majoring in Law. All interested students co-register for the following courses: American Government, Introduction to Philosophy: Ethics, and Fundamentals of Public Speaking. Another Freshman Interest Group is entitled, “Liberal Arts: Our Cultures, Ourselves.” Students enrolling in this interest

group register for: Introduction to Women's Studies, Introduction to Folklore and Myth, and Fundamentals of Small Group Communication (Hill, 1985; Levine, et al, 1999).

At the University of Missouri, FIGS are living learning communities (Barefoot, et al, 1999). Cohorts of twenty students take three courses together and also reside in the same residence hall. For example, in the FIG, "Spectrum of Behavior" the students enroll in General Psychology, College Algebra, Biology for non-majors and Freshman Pro-Seminar. The students are housed together in Hudson Hall. In the FIG "The Arts in Our Times" the students enroll in Jazz, Pop, and Rock English, American History, and Freshman Pro-Seminar. The students are housed together in Hudson Hall (Levine, et al, 1999). Other colleges and universities using Freshman Interest Groups include: University of Hawaii at Manoa, Hawaii; Illinois State University in Normal, Illinois; Michigan State University in East Lansing, Michigan; North Carolina Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina; Gettysburg College in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania; Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Eastern Washington University in Cheney, Washington; Seattle Pacific University in Seattle, Washington; Washington State University in Pullman, Washington; University of Wisconsin in Madison, Wisconsin and University of Guelph in Guelph, Ontario, Canada (Lucas & Mott, 1996, p.4).

At the University of Washington they have developed a variation to the Freshman Interest Group called the Transfer Interest Group. This FIG helps build coherence and community for transfer students in large universities. A sociology transfer interest group

consists of: Sociology and the Family, Political Economy of Women and Family in the 3<sup>rd</sup> World, and Sociology Interest Group Seminar (Levine, et al, 1999).

Each freshman interest group has a peer advisor assigned to it who convenes the group frequently throughout the semester (Hill, 1985). This older student organizes the first meeting of the FIG during Freshmen Orientation and then convenes the group weekly throughout the semester. During their meeting sessions, the group discuss issues related to student life on campus, form study groups or just spend informal time together (Gabelnick, et al, 1990). Thus, the Freshman Interest Group model is a low-change model because there is no team teaching by faculty. The Freshman Interest Groups are an excellent opportunity for students in a discipline to interact with one another both formally in class and informally in study groups ( Barefoot, et al, 1999; Levine, et al, 1999; Smith, 1991).

#### Federated Learning Community.

The Federated Learning Community (FLC) is a more complex model that, like the Freshman Interest Groups, is appropriate for student cohorts in larger universities. This model provides both a sense of community for students and considerable faculty development for professors. The Federated Learning Community was developed by philosophy professor, Patrick Hill at the State University of New York (SUNY) at Stony Brook. Similar to the Freshman Interest Group model, the FLC is an attempt to help students overcome the isolation and anonymity of a large research university (Gabelnick, et al 1990; Hill, 1985). In Hill's model, a cohort of students co-register for three "federated" courses linked by a common theme. In addition, the students enroll in a

three-credit seminar. This discussion section is related to all three courses and is led by a Master Learner (Hill, 1985). The Master Learner is a professor from a discipline that is not represented in the federated courses. They are expected to become a learner and take all three federated courses with the students. The Master Learner also convenes the program seminars. The Master Learner's age and training put them in a position to assist students in their learning. The Master Learner is relieved of all teaching duties during this time (Gabelnick, et al, 1990; Levine, et al, 1999; Lucas & Mott, 1996). SUNY at Stony Brook's Federated Learning Community model links the three courses: General Genetics, The Healer and the Witch History, and Philosophy and Medicine, with the three credit seminar entitled: Social and Ethical Issues in Life Sciences (Gabelnick, et al, 1990; Hill, 1985). This learning community was intended for upper-division students majoring in biology or psychology who are planning medical careers (Gabelnick, et al, 1990). At Western Washington University the students enroll in a federated learning community in their major field of study in order to provide community and academic success for a special student cohort. For example, the "Law and Diversity" program creates both a pre-law interdisciplinary major and a community of learners. Students, during their first quarter, enroll in the American Legal System, Politics of Inequality, Race, Politics and Public Policy plus a 4-5 credit integrative seminar (Levine, et al, 1999). This model provides many opportunities for faculty development for both the Master Learner and the professors of the federated courses. However, this model can be costly since a faculty member is freed from their teaching duties for a term or a year to become the Master Learner. Some institutions have made cost adaptations to the model. For example, at the



University of Maryland, the Master Learner is an outstanding senior high school teacher on sabbatical for a year. Also, at some institutions, to cut costs, the weekly seminar is convened by one of the three federated faculty members (Gabelnick, et al, 1990; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). The following institutions have successful federated learning communities: Diablo Valley College in Pleasant Hill, California; Centralia College in Centralia, Washington; Skagit-Whidbey College in Oak Harbor, Washington and Spokane Community College in Spokane, Washington (Lucas & Mott, 1996, p. 5).

#### Coordinated Studies Model

The final model, which falls under the heading of team taught programs, is the Coordinated Studies model. This model is the most radical of learning community models because it changes the traditional curriculum. The learning community engages full-time (15-18 credits) in interdisciplinary, active learning around themes. There is increased faculty development through co-planning and team-teaching across disciplinary boundaries. Faculty teams of 3-4 co-plan the coordinated study around an over-arching theme, or around related content/skills subjects. Generally, faculty members teach only in the coordinated study program and students register for it as their entire course load. Thus, course scheduling is flexible which creates opportunities for blocks of time for lectures, field trips, workshops and other active learning activities (Hill, 1985; Levine, et al, 1999; Lucas & Mott, 1996; Smith, 1993; Tinto & Russo, 1994). The goals of the coordinated model are: more intense student immersion into interrelated topics; more faculty participation as learners as well as teachers; the blurring of boundaries between disciplines or courses in favor of a larger whole; and the faculty development that

emerges from collaborative planning, delivery and reflection on a coordinated program (Levine, et al, 1999, p.38). An example of a Coordinated Studies model is the Quanta Program at Daytona Beach Community College. It is a yearlong program involving three courses (9 credits) each semester. In the fall the students register for “The Quest for Identity: the Search for Identity and Intimacy” triad which includes: English Composition, Psychology of Adjustment and Humanities I. In the spring the students register for “Threshold to the Millennium: Towards a Better World” triad which includes: English 2, General Psychology and Humanities 2 (Levine, et al, 1999). The Evergreen State College is an example of an entire institution organized around learning communities. In 1971 Evergreen was established as a new state college based totally on the principles of interdisciplinary and collaborative learning. The curriculum at Evergreen remains organized around year long integrated programs and not three or four credit courses. The programs are team taught and planned by groups of two to five faculty. Some examples of coordinated studies programs at Evergreen State College are: “The Paradox of Progress,” “Great Books,” “Human Development” and “Democracy and Tyranny.” The curriculum at Evergreen varies yearly, and the students and faculty are involved in only one coordinated academic program at a time (Gabelnick, et al, 1992). The following other states have extensive coordinated study programs in the university and community college systems: Arizona, California, Colorado, Illinois, Maine, Michigan, Missouri, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Texas, Tennessee, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin (Lucas & Mott, 1996).

## Implementation of Learning Communities: Successes and Concerns

### Overview.

Initial studies indicate that learning communities do work (Levine et al, 1999; Levine & Tompkins, 1996; Matthews, 1994; Smith, 1991). Where learning communities make a difference is in their ability to alter curriculum structure to create new connections among disciplines, students, and faculty (Lucas & Mott, 1996; Smith, 1991). The literature reveals that learning communities increase intellectual interaction among students and between students and faculty (Hill, 1985; Levine, et al, 1999; Matthews, 1994; Smith, 1991). Also, results indicate increased student involvement in learning and a sense of community. Learning community programs show increased academic achievement and intellectual development, and higher retention rates among student participants. The communities increase curricular coherence and the potential for an integration of ideas. Learning communities eliminate the fragmentation of learning (Hill, 1985; Levine, et al, 1999; Lucas & Mott, 1996; Smith, 1991). Patrick Hill (1985), in his article "The Rationale for Learning Communities and Learning Community Models," mentions a classroom experience that reinforces the need to eliminate the fragmentation of disciplines. He notes,

I will tell a brief story that influenced my thinking to go in the direction of learning communities. The story concerns an undergraduate student I knew while I was director of undergraduate studies and philosophy in the summertime. She was taking a course in behaviorism from 10:00 to 1:00 and a course in

existentialism from 1:00 to 4:00. And she was pulling A's in both courses. In the behaviorism course – this was pure Skinner—she was learning about the .67 predictability of human behavior and of the illusory character of consciousness and intentions and certainly of their insignificance in explaining human behavior. In the philosophy course, which was focused on the early Sartre, she was learning that we are ultimately free, even to the point of being able to define the meaning of our pasts. I asked her which course was right. She said, “What do you mean?” I said, “If you had to choose between the two courses, which one would you choose?” She said, “I like the psychology teacher better.” I said, “That’s not what I’m asking. Which one is correct? Which one is correct about the nature of our human being? And she said, “I’m getting A’s in both courses” (Hill, 1985, p.3).

This student’s reaction is typical since traditionally college students are not required to pull together knowledge from a wide variety of fields and integrate it in one mind (Hill, 1985).

The faculty also benefit in a learning community environment. Faculty members collaborate with their peers to revitalize curriculum. They are put in touch with colleagues from different disciplines, which renews dialogue. Veteran professors share their expertise with younger faculty, and younger faculty share new ideas with veteran faculty (Lucas & Mott, 1996; Smith, 1991). Learning communities help rekindle the

creative side of teaching. Joseph Katz (1987) in his article “Learning to Help Students Learn” noted: “Continuous learning on the part of the faculty seems to be a prerequisite for the needed transformation of teaching” (p.8). Smith (1991) builds on his idea and states, “Associative structures that support continuous learning on the part of groups of faculty seem to be a prerequisite for the needed transformation of our colleges. Learning communities are one of these associative structures” (p.47). In order to insure the successful implementation of a learning community, there are several conditions that need to be established.

#### Implementation: Ownership of a learning community.

It is important that faculty be involved in the planning and development of the learning community. The faculty must feel a sense of camaraderie and ownership for the program. Ownership of the learning community program also needs to be shared among both faculty and administrators (Elliott & Decker, 1999; Raymond, 1999). The planners need to recognize the strengths and limitations of an institution and must work within that environment. The culture and values of an institution are important parts of the overall environment and must be considered by the developers of a learning community (Jundt, et al, 1999). The administrators quite often view the learning community in a larger context and can help “frame the project usefully within the strategic and financial plans of the institution” (Gabelnick, et al, 1990, p.40). Administrators view the learning community as a means to rejuvenate faculty and promote active faculty dialogue about curriculum. If the administration perceives the learning community as isolated from the institution or, if the faculty as a whole view the learning community faculty as the “in”

group or elite group, problems can arise. Further, some of the major administrative concerns include:

1. Room scheduling and providing adequate space for large groups that are not in a lecture format.
2. Minimum and maximum enrollment numbers required in these courses. The student/faculty ratio may need to be stretched in order to encourage these new programs. This may or may not have budgetary concerns.
3. Funds to support administrative costs and faculty stipends to promote the program.
4. Divisions within the college will front the cost of part-time replacement faculty while full-time professors are involved in learning communities.
5. Distrust and animosity between faculty and administration will need to be addressed to alleviate development issues during periods of change. The most successful learning communities are faculty driven (Lucas & Mott, 1996, p.9).

The planners of the learning community need to connect the learning community project to other campus concerns such as, a retention initiative or general education to increase the probability of a greater impact on students (Gardner & Levine, 1999; Levine, et al, 1999). At one institution, the founding faculty wrote:

There were many barriers to establishing the program. It was designed by a tiny group of faculty and developed outside the administration. The administration was divided about whether

they wanted to have the program at all. They were generally skeptical of doing anything different. There were problems with rooms and registering a cluster of classes. The life of the project just wasn't in their head and they didn't understand the value of doing it. They did finally give the go-ahead because we'd worked so hard to develop it. But, of course, we had to do all the legwork (Gabelnick, et al, 1990).

Eventually, the learning community must find stable leadership and an administrative home at the institution or else it is bound to fail. An administrator should act as the coordinator of the project so that the professors are freed to work on curriculum development, instruction, and evaluation. The best arrangement is for a partnership between faculty and administrators who meet on a regular basis to discuss learning community issues (Elliott & Decker, 1999; Gabelnick, et al, 1990). "Ideally, the coordinator works with an advising committee that represents all stakeholders, including students, who have an investment in learning communities" (Gardner & Levine, 1999, p.112).

#### Implementation: Selecting a model.

Other factors that need to be conceptualized in the implementation of a learning community are choosing the appropriate model, selecting the constituent courses and identifying the program themes. These are determined through an examination of the institution's goals and mission (Gabelnick, 1990). The organizers must consider the goals of the project and select the model that best suits the teaching and learning

environment of that institution (Gardner & Levine, 1999; Levine, et al, 1999). For example, the institution must ask itself: Will the learning community be instituted for faculty development, as a general education reform effort, or as a writing or critical thinking initiative? What distribution requirements could be usefully linked together? What content courses might benefit from closer articulation with basic skills courses? How well does the general education course-work cohere? Could it be better tied to the major? Are there some areas with high student attrition that might benefit from a learning community design? (Gabelnick, et al, 1990).

Since students are concerned about satisfying requirements, it is important to organize the learning communities around popular courses such as, general education or pre-major courses. For example, learning communities that are connected with student majors, such as, pre-law, pre-health, and pre-engineering, successfully attract students, whereas, courses with unclear associations usually suffer (Gabelnick, et al, 1990, p.43). Gardner and Levine (1999) recommend that institutions begin their learning communities initiative with a limited number of sections and gradually expand the program. Temple University (Levine & Tompkins, 1996) began its learning community effort in 1993 influenced by the models of other innovative institutions, such as, Evergreen State College. However, these elaborate models were inappropriate for the Temple student body. Temple “linked non required courses that stimulated faculty but attracted too few students, or used courses that were required but that did not draw significant numbers of first year students” (Levine & Tompkins, 1996, p.2). Many communities had to be canceled and the learning community endeavor at Temple was revamped. For the fall



1994 semester, Temple offered learning communities that filled important core area requirements and had few or no pre-requisites (Levine & Tompkins, 1996).

The institution also needs to evaluate whether the learning community theme and content are fixed or varied. Sometimes the themes are consistent and the component courses fluctuate. For example, at the University of North Dakota the federated learning community program involves new faculty and changing themes each year, whereas, at Stockton State College the federated learning community program involves the same faculty and themes each year (Gabelnick, et al, 1990).

#### Implementation: Selecting the faculty.

Another condition that effects the implementation of a learning community initiative is the selection of the appropriate faculty. The faculty needs to be open to new methods and styles of teaching. Faculty must be willing to reflect together on their roles as teacher. In a learning community, faculty need to be able to come together to “share their teaching, considering syllabus preparation, class presentation, and student problems” (Levine & Tompkins, 1996, p.3). In a learning community, the faculty are “removed as the authority who provide knowledge and are replaced by the facilitator who is an active participant in learning with and from the students” (Lucas & Mott, 1996, p.7). Faculty must set aside their traditional methods of teaching and discover innovative strategies for teaching and learning. Certain faculty are more receptive to changing their methods of teaching than others and these faculty must be encouraged to participate in learning communities (Lucas & Mott, 1996). Professors also need to come together with all those involved in the learning community, planners and students, to debrief and

share their experiences (Gardner & Levine, 1999). Quite often institutions engage professors in faculty development activities to share teaching experiences and techniques. Appropriate faculty development, support for the design, initiation, and ongoing development of the learning community is necessary for implementing successful learning community programs (Levine, et al, 1999). Also, there is a wealth of excellent part-time faculty who can make major contributions to the learning community endeavor and need to be included in faculty development efforts (Gabelnick, et al, 1990).

Implementation: Recruiting the students.

Most important to the successful implementation of learning communities is the need for rigorous recruitment of students to the program. “While learning communities are often geared toward special populations such as under-prepared students, first year students and minority students, no evidence exists to suggest that learning communities work better for these special target groups than they do for any other group of students. On the contrary, research suggests that the shared learning between student and faculty that occurs in learning communities can be beneficial to all types of students” (Gardner & Levine, 1999, p.111). Therefore, many institutions make posters, booklets, and put articles in the school newspaper, and catalog to promote learning community participation for all students (Gabelnick, et al, 1990). At Temple University learning communities are marketed actively to students through admission programs and program brochures. At new-student orientation, students register for a learning community (Levine & Tompkins, 1996). Current and former learning community participants are also an excellent resource for recruiting new students because they have experienced the

learning community firsthand. Further, to recruit students, learning community organizers need to determine which classes will draw students towards a learning community. If courses that are popular or in high demand are offered in a learning community, students will be attracted to the learning community concept. Students also worry about fulfilling requirements. Therefore, learning communities can be built around undergraduate core courses. Consequently, if learning communities are organized around courses of student interest, and courses that help them fulfill requirements, students will be more likely to enroll in a learning community (Jundt, et al, 1999).

A concern for a learning community initiative is the power of the students. According to Levine and Tompkins (1996), when a student cohort has courses scheduled back to back they spend time between and during classes talking to each other. This provides students with more opportunity to voice concerns about a particular course or the learning community experience. At Temple University, this “group power” emerged when content in a linked course was not integrated, when teachers talked down to students, or when faculty failed to make clear their collaboration efforts (Levine & Tompkins, 1996, p.2). The effectiveness of learning communities can be enhanced by, “incorporating a variety of components into the learning community format and context such as orientation, advising, peer mentoring, and peer advising. These components stress elements of social, emotional and cognitive development vitally important for new students” (Gardner & Levine, 1999, p.113).

Implementation: Developing partnerships between academic and student affairs.

Another factor that needs addressing in the successful implementation of learning communities is the need for developing effective partnerships between academic affairs and student affairs personnel. At our colleges and universities today there is a fragmentation or specialization of organizational responsibilities rather than a sense of community. A gap frequently exists between academic affairs and student affairs due to a lack of understanding and appreciation for the distinct roles of each area. The institution views teaching and learning as the role of the faculty and the supplementation of student development as the role of the student affairs personnel. The assumption is that course work and curriculum are the concern of the faculty and the informal, out of class learning, is the concern of the student affairs staff (Schroeder, Minor, & Tarkow, 1999). Therefore, in order to design effective learning communities there needs to be joint planning and implementation between academic and student affairs personnel. Individuals in student and academic affairs need to coordinate both in and out of class learning experiences to create effective learning communities. For example, field trips and community service activities help achieve learning community objectives. Jointly, the academic and student affairs personnel must define desired outcomes and they must develop strategies to evaluate those outcomes. This will help both areas to assess and improve the quality of the learning community (Schroeder, et al, 1999).

It is also critical that advisors and registration staff are educated about learning communities (Levine & Tompkins, 1999). A survey at twelve institutions in Washington found that more than half of the students in learning communities had been advised by

counselors and registration staff (Gabelnick, 1990). Therefore, to make a learning community program work, it is critical to involve academic advisors and orientation staff in the process (Jundt, et al, 1999). The registrar and the advisors must be consulted in the initial process of establishing learning communities in order to minimize problems (Bennett, 1999). The staff should be invited to attend program and planning meetings to get a feel for the learning community initiative. According to Jundt, Etzkorn, and Johnson (1999), “the best way to institutionalize a learning community program is to build the registration process into the existing orientation, advising and registration system” (p.36). At Temple University, the learning community program has built a strong relationship with the registrar and has mastered course scheduling (Levine & Tompkins, 1996). Bennett (1999) states that academic advisors participate in six functions when implementing and managing learning community programs. The six functions are:

1. Deciding how communities will be structured, specifically curricular decisions.
2. Assisting students with selecting learning communities and with registration.
3. Selecting, supporting, and assessing student peer leaders.
4. Administering, or helping to administer the program.
5. Teaching the one-credit seminar/student success component.
6. Identifying additional support needs of students and faculty in learning communities (p.72).

These six functions all focus on the advisors making and maintaining connections between students, faculty and staff. In order for a learning community program to be successful there needs to be communication and connections made. The registrar and advisors can make recommendations and contributions to the learning communities program that will insure successful implementation of the learning communities (Bennett, 1999).

#### Implementation: Funding.

Securing adequate funding for implementing the learning community project can also be an issue at many institutions since the programs are new and often “cross established budgetary unit lines” (Gabelnick, et al, 1990, p.47). Again, having administrative support is crucial for institutional funding. Several institutions, such as SUNY at Stony Brook, University of Maryland, Rollins College, and Babson College have secured funds from external grants (Gabelnick, et al, 1990). Both the academic and student affairs areas at the institution (Gardner & Levine, 1999) fund other programs, such as the FIG program at the University of Missouri-Columbia. Much of the funding needs arise in the first year to orient staff and faculty and to recruit students. Many institutions need funds to run seminars, workshops, and bring in outside speakers for faculty development (Gabelnick, et al, 1990). It is crucial for the successful implementation of learning communities that faculty receive training that will “help them step outside the box of traditional classroom pedagogy” (Gardner & Levine, 1999. P.113).

### Implementation: Ongoing assessment.

Ongoing assessment is also crucial to the successful implementation of a learning community (Gardner & Levine, 1999). However, evaluating learning communities can offer unique challenges for researchers. A complex set of objectives makes it difficult to identify all the criteria needed to determine the effectiveness of these objectives. Even when the criteria are identified it is difficult to develop good measures for the evaluation process (Lucas & Mott, 1996). Addressing this problem, Gardner and Levine (1999) recommend that an assessment plan and, a method of “feeding the findings” back into the program be developed in the initial phases of program development. To adequately assess a program, Gardner and Levine (1999) state three important questions that need to be answered: (a.) Why are we doing this (purpose of the assessment) (b.) Who will be the subjects? (c.) What will be assessed? Further, Gardner and Levine (1999) note that a researcher in the institution, not involved in the learning community initiative, should perform the assessment. The researcher should use both quantitative and qualitative methodologies in assessment of the learning communities. A variety of techniques should be used including “surveys, individual interviews, focus groups, ethnography of field research, participant observation, classroom assessment techniques, student portfolios, self-assessment by students and faculty, and reflective student writing”(Gardner & Levine, 1999, p. 114).

### Institutional Adaptations to the Learning Community Concept

Learning communities will survive best if they are aligned with the values of the institution. They will work if faculty, administrators, staff and students invest time and

energy into their institutional efforts. “Learning communities are sustained when the learning community conversations become embedded in the daily academic, social and political discourse about learning” (Gabelnick, et al, 1990, p.50).

The learning community is an approach that can be adapted to any campus environment. There are successful learning communities on community college, residential, commuter, urban, and suburban campuses (Gardner & Levine, 1999). Even though various institutional models have been discussed, it was also important, in a comprehensive review of the literature, to examine both the programs and the outcomes of several learning community initiatives around the country.

#### Four Year Institutions.

The literature contains numerous studies (Eanes, 1992; Isbell, 1996; Costell & Stahl, 1996; Lucas & Mott, 1996; Tokuno & Campbell, 1992) where learning community models have been implemented at colleges and universities in various forms, and have produced an array of results. Eanes (1992) at St. Edwards University in Texas, researched whether differences existed between freshman “high risk” students in a linked-course developmental program and other freshmen who were not required to participate in the developmental program. Students participating in the linked learning community enrolled in developmental English, reading and a humanities course. The developmental reading and English professors provided support for the humanities course by guiding students in the development of metacognitive awareness, study skills, reading strategies, critical thinking and essay writing. University faculty felt that without this developmental support, the “high risk” students would have difficulty succeeding in the



Humanities portion of freshman studies. Results indicated that the “high risk” students completed their first general education course with success equal to that of their freshman classmates who were not “high risk” students, even though their level of success did not always equal that of the non-developmental participants (Eanes, 1992).

During the Fall 1995 semester, a team of three professors offered a nine credit learning community cluster to a group of 47 self-enrolled students at rural Central Arizona College (Isbell, et al, 1996). The course, entitled “As World’s Collide,” combined methodologies from social psychology, history, and communications to explore questions concerning culture and community. The course met twice a week from 8:00 a.m. until 1:15 p.m. The morning sessions were devoted to lectures, guest lecturers, team presentations, and film presentations. During the afternoon, the students met in seminar groups of fifteen students to discuss reading assignment. Faculty members were present but not as active participants or lecturers. Student assessment was achieved through the use of a portfolio. Each student accumulated class notes, film sheet responses, seminar discussion questions, and three synthesis papers. In the synthesis papers the students developed an original observation which incorporated critical thinking skills with the course content. The faculty noted several learning outcomes:

- Class comfort levels allows for learning
- Writing skills improved through class discussion
- The word community encourages the establishment of support systems, bonding occurs at all levels
- Critical thinking improves

- Social skills improve through group activities
- Knowledge and skills transfer to other classes
- Academic development focuses not on volume but quality of outside class assignments
- Students recognizes his/her own improvement in academic performance
- Free speech awareness of others' values, culture and beliefs is developed
- A sense of organization and the interrelatedness of learning is developed
- Writing skills improve through the use of personal journals and portfolios

Northern Illinois University (Costello & Stahl, 1996) offers a learning community program designed between a developmental reading, a writing program, a freshman experience program, and a teacher education program to increase the number of students of color recruited and retained in teacher education. The goal of the university was to recruit entering special admissions or developmental education students who were interested in the teaching profession, and provide them with thematically linked developmental courses directly related to teaching and support systems. According to Costello & Stahl (1996), the rationale for the learning community project at Northern Illinois University was:

- Involve students in a learning community that related to and values their academic and career goals and interests, as well as their life experiences.
- Provide developmental education services that promote the transfer of learning strategies and skills to courses in the general studies or major programs.

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- Provide a freshman seminar experience linked to the developmental education course work.
- Provide students with foundational knowledge supporting success in professional courses.
- Give students the opportunity to develop relationships with other cohort members interested in careers in education.

Students enrolled in three linked courses during the first semester, a college reading course, a basic writing course, and a freshman experience course. During the second semester they enrolled in college reading and study strategies course, a general writing course, and an introduction to educational foundations course. Weekly, the students met with a counselor from Educational Services and Programs and with an advisor from the College of Education to successfully acclimate the students to the university environment. According to Costello and Stahl (1996), results were favorable for both faculty and students. The Northern Illinois faculty increased collaboration, sharing of ideas and planning of coordinated lesson activities and events with their peers. The interactions between faculty/students and students/students appeared to have a positive effect on the students overall acclimation to social and academic life. However, assessment methods were not discussed in the study. There also appeared to be a significant benefit to participating in the learning community in terms of cumulative GPA's and second year retention rates as compared to the general special admission population (Costello & Stahl, 1996).

At William Rainey Harper College in Illinois (Lucas & Mott, 1996) the achievement of students in two models of learning communities, linked and coordinated studies, were compared to students in two comparative groups. The linked classes involved a cohort of students enrolled in the same two course sections and with the same two faculty teaching in a team format. These courses were offered during the fall of 1993, the spring of 1994, and the fall of 1994. Comparison groups were students who took the same courses during the same semesters but in a non-linked model. In the second type of learning community, coordinated studies, the same cohort of students registered for the same five course sections. There were three clusters of coordinated studies in the fall 1992, spring 1993 and fall 1993. Comparison groups were students who took the same courses during the same semesters but in a non-linked model. The objectives of the learning community were to “encourage intensive group interaction and communication and promote independent learning and thinking skills” (Lucas & Mott, 1996, p.11). Measures were developed to evaluate this objective. Transcript analysis was used to examine academic achievement and a survey was used to examine the extent to which learning attitudes and group skills were achieved. Two measures, grade point average at Harper and percent saying they felt their technical skill preparation for a job was good, favored the comparison groups over the experimental groups. Significant differences in group skills and attitude toward learning favored the experimental groups over the comparison groups (Lucas & Mott, 1996). The researchers concluded that while some of the results of the comparison were promising for learning communities, the findings needed to be verified many more times. Further, they felt that a wider variety of

criteria measures needed to be developed over a variety of learning environments. Lucas and Mott (1996) also felt that a good cost model needed to be developed to compare the new learning environments to standard classroom environments.

The University of Washington offers first year students participation in a Freshman Interest Group Program (FIG). The University of Washington is a public university in an urban setting that enrolls approximately 23,000 undergraduates each fall. The University of Washington established a FIG program in 1987 in order to make the larger university seem smaller for undergraduates. The FIG program brought a small group of freshman together in the same two or three courses organized around a theme. The freshmen met weekly in discussion groups led by an undergraduate (Tokuno & Campbell, 1992). A study was undertaken (Tokuno & Campbell, 1992) to compare retention and scholarship between students participating in the FIG learning community and students in a traditional classroom environment. The results revealed that students at Washington University who were in the FIG had slightly higher retention rates than students in traditional courses. Further, the overall grade point average for a student in the FIG program was significantly higher. Tokuno (1993) continued his research at the University of Washington with a long-term study on the scholarship, progress and retention of learning community students in the FIG program. He found that students at the University of Washington who had participated in the FIG not only received higher grades than the non-participating students during the first semester, but also three semesters later. Further, he found that students in the FIG program were more likely to persist in college, and progressed faster towards a degree than non-participating student.

Learning communities are being organized throughout our four-year institutions. As seen in the literature, each learning community is uniquely designed to fit the culture and needs of a particular college or university.

### Community colleges.

The community college is an institution for traditional and non-traditional students with the benefits of convenience, low tuition, and small classes. Students live off campus, work part or full time, and commute to classes (Bystrom, 1999). In 1994, Boggs noted that:

43 percent of all American, postsecondary students taking courses for college credit and 51 percent of all first-time American college students are enrolled in community colleges. Nationwide 6.5 million students are enrolled in the community college credit programs and another 5 million are taking community college non-credit courses. Most women, minorities and people with disabilities who are pursuing a higher education are enrolled in our community colleges (p.4).

The community college offers programs that prepare students for employment or for college transfer. For transfer purposes, the community college offers students a wide variety of general courses similar to those taught at other two and four year colleges. The turnover of students at a community college is much greater than at a four-year institution. Many students transfer, or are at the community college just to take a few courses for personal reasons. Due to minimal social and financial pressures at a community college, students frequently withdraw without completing programs or

attaining degrees. This “take it or leave it attitude” about education negatively effects community college retention statistics (Bystrom, 1999, p.88).

Further, a vital feature of the community college is the “open door” policy that admits those students who might otherwise be denied higher education (Boggs, 1994). However, quite often the “open door” policy attracts a large number of academically disadvantaged students with poor literacy skills. This causes several problems for the community college. First, these non-traditional students face academic difficulty with college level courses. Also, many of the community college faculty are not prepared to teach these non-traditional students. They do not have special training in literacy skills. Consequently, there is a higher drop out rate of these students ( Sherman, 1976; Tinto & Goodsell, 1993). The community college has responded to this problem by creating remedial courses in the areas of reading, writing and math. The effectiveness of these courses should be measured by student success in their major academic area of study. However, the literature reveals that the information taught in the remedial courses has not been transferred to academic courses (Hill, 1986; Sherman, 1976; Smith, 1991; Tinto & Goodsell, 1993). One answer to this problem is to link literacy skills with academic course content. Students would simultaneously be able to transfer reading/writing/study skills to an academic area (Sherman, 1976). At Norwalk Community College in Connecticut, a fundamentals of reading course was paired with Introduction to Psychology. The psychology instructor provided the reading instructor with his course objectives and assignments, which led to dialogue and interaction between the two faculty members. The reading professor shared with the psychology professor techniques

for organizing materials in both texts and lectures. This helped him gain an insight into the learning needs of remedial students. Further, the participants felt that the teaching of reading and writing in conjunction with an academic course facilitated the transfer of skills to other academic disciplines (Sherman, 1976). Professor Debora Sherman, the reading professor in this project stated, "English is not about itself. One must read and write about something" (p.4). She noted that,

When students can receive direct instruction in reading an assigned textbook chapter; gain specific techniques for organizing the material in that chapter; practice reciting the important facts and concepts of that chapter; receive guidance in writing about that chapter; learn methods of test taking on that chapter, they can gain enough success to change their perceptions of themselves as students while mastering the skills necessary for success (Sherman, 1976, p.5).

The creation of this learning community provided the remedial student with a chance for academic success in higher education.

In 1976, unaware that they were creating what would eventually be called a "learning community," Professor Debora Sherman began to redefine the community college as a learning institution.

Therefore, the community college is a perfect location to design curriculum around learning communities (Matthews, 1986). The learning community helps to "ease the tensions often associated with highly diverse and transient populations by building



collegiality in the community college” (Bystrom, 1999, p.88). Students in a transient environment are presented with a sense of community. Student and faculty learn from each other and converse more about ideas and experiences. Closer ties develop and students develop a different attitude about their learning, which can help retain students at the community college (Bystrom, 1999; Cross, 1989).

Another community college that has a large learning community initiative is LaGuardia Community College, in New York. At LaGuardia the learning community courses follow either a paired or clustered model (Matthews, 1986). A study was undertaken (Tinto & Love, 1995) to compare the learning experiences of students in a traditional classroom environment with first year students in a learning community environment. A qualitative case study was also undertaken to examine whether collaborative learning strategies effectively aid the academic needs of students at LaGuardia. The results of the extensive, grant funded project revealed that compared to a traditional environment, students in the LaGuardia learning community perceived their classes, other students, faculty, counselors, campus climate and their own involvement in education more positively than students in a traditional classroom. Learning community students at LaGuardia also earned more credits and had higher grade point averages than students in traditional classes. The persistence rate of students in the learning communities was only slightly higher than students in traditional classes. However, the learning community students reported that the learning community experience provided them with higher levels of social and academic support. They felt that they benefited from the consistent structure of the learning community. Students in the learning

community expressed a higher intention to continue in higher education because they felt that the learning community environment, with group work and collaborative learning, was more fun than traditional methods. Further, the learning community students at LaGuardia valued diversity and continuity of topics across courses in their learning community (Tinto & Love, 1995).

Although the University of Arkansas at Little Rock is a four-year institution, it fits the demographic profile of most community colleges because it is a non-residential institution. The University of Arkansas at Little Rock is an urban university with 11,000 students, averaging 27 years old, who work part or full-time off campus (Raymond, 1999). The learning community initiative at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock clustered Composition I, Speech and Anthropology. The three professors participating in the learning community project used several instruments to assess their learning community. First, the students wrote both an initial and final essay on the same topic. Results revealed a more sophisticated understanding of the topic and better writing skills from pre to posttest. The students were also given a lengthy questionnaire concerning their participation in the learning community. The results suggested that participating students endorsed the learning community concept. They frequently noted that the learning community was a fun, comfortable environment that helped increase their number of friends. Rarely did the students comment that the learning community increased their knowledge in a particular subject area. The researchers also used a focus group of eight students to aid in assessing the learning community. Again, the students, when interviewed, praised the new friends, and comfort level of the learning community.

They complained about their workload compared to traditional classes. Students also indicated that they would like to take more linked courses at higher levels. The faculty in the project kept a reflective journal, as did the students. The student journal was part of a final portfolio of their semester's work. The reflective journals of both faculty and students provided a look back at where and how learning happened or collapsed in the learning community (Raymond, 1999).

At Daytona Beach Community College a cluster model learning community linked English, psychology, and a humanities course around a common theme (Avens & Zelle, 1992). Data was collected on the QUANTA program at Daytona Beach Community College in four research areas. The first study assessed the intellectual development of the QUANTA learning community students. The Measure of Intellectual Development essay test was administered to students in the beginning and again at the end of the semester. Results indicate that the mean change for students in the QUANTA program were greater in one year than the mean change for non-participating students after four years of college. A second study examined student retention data for students participating in the QUANTA learning community. Results indicated a mean retention rate of 92% for the fall and 94% for the spring semester. These results are consistent with many other learning community initiatives which support the idea that collaborative learning experiences tend to lower attrition rates (Avens & Zelle, 1992). The third study summarized the findings from student evaluations of the learning community through the use of open-ended survey questions. A rank order of the student responses revealed the top five outcomes concerning participation in a learning community. Students noted: 1.

The QUANTA experience helped me realize that there are multiple perspectives with which to view an issue. 2. The QUANTA experience was worthwhile because it gave me the opportunity to learn from other students as well as faculty. 3. The QUANTA experience was worthwhile because of the active learning methods used. 4. The QUANTA experience was worthwhile because of the friendships I made. 5. The QUANTA experience helped me learn how to work effectively in group situations. Finally, the fourth study reported the findings of a survey of the attitudes of QUANTA alumni toward the learning community program. A questionnaire was sent to all students who had participated in the QUANTA program. The researchers examined the responses of the question: Looking back, what do you think was most beneficial about your QUANTA experience? The answers to this question were grouped according to theme, and then tabulated to gain insight into what features of a learning community stood out for alumni students. The top features noted by the alumni students were: the community experience, the interdisciplinary course structure, development of critical and creative thinking, personal growth, transition to college, teachers' characteristics and attitudes, enjoyable learning experiences, and teaching methods (Avens & Zelle, 1992).

The STAR project, Students and Teachers Achieving Results, was developed for basic skills students at Long Beach City Community College, in California (Mackay, et al, 1996). The project created a linked model learning community for twenty-four, at-risk students in reading, writing, math and study skills courses at the institution. The STAR project developed communication skills, built self-esteem and offered social and academic support for the participating students. The learning community utilized an

interdisciplinary curriculum, and a collaborative learning teaching approach. The goals of the program were to improve student academic skills, improve persistence, and elevate self-esteem. Both quantitative and qualitative measures were used to measure program outcomes. Quantitatively, the researchers examined pre and posttest reading, math and writing scores, pre and post test attitude and self-esteem tests, course retention and withdrawal rates, completion ratios, and rates of enrollment in successive courses. Qualitatively, the researchers examined students through student and faculty questionnaires, interviews, student conferences, weekly journal entries, informal evaluation sessions, and course and program evaluations. Although no statistical data was discussed in the study, the researchers determined that the STAR project significantly improved student reading and writing skills, advanced a larger number of students to higher level courses, improved student retention rates, increased completion rates and elevated student self-esteem (Mackay, et al, 1996).

In 1974, Seattle Central Community College was the first community college in Washington state to develop a coordinated studies learning community program. Still thriving today, the student's register for a thematic cluster of courses that are team taught by faculty from several different disciplines (Tinto, Goodsell & Russo, 1993). The learning community clusters focus on courses that satisfy general education requirements, and include developmental or transfer courses (Gabelnick, et al, 1992). For example, in the cluster, "The Televised Mind," sixty to seventy-five students meet in a large classroom for fifteen hours per week with faculty from psychology, sociology and English. Once a week the class separates into three smaller groups for seminar

discussions (Tinto, et al, 1993). Tinto, Goodsell and Russo (1993) studied the collaborative learning experience at Seattle Central Community College, focusing on the academic and social experiences of the first year college students. A panel of first year college students was selected that included both learning community program students and non-program students. The students were given survey questionnaires periodically during their first year to track their academic and social behaviors, perceptions of academic experiences, and academic performance and persistence. The results revealed that students who participated in a collaborative group learning community developed a community of peers that supported each other both in and out of class. The students were able to “meet two needs, social and academic, without having to sacrifice one to address the other” (Tinto, et al, 1993, p.20). The study also indicated that students realized that their learning increased due to the variety of perspectives presented in the interdisciplinary learning community environment. The surveys revealed that students in a learning community viewed their learning experiences differently than in a traditional setting. Students noted, “you had to learn, not just memorize” (Tinto, et al, 1993, p.21). The student’s academic performance and persistence were greater in the learning community environment than in the traditional setting. Finally, the results indicated that the non-residential community college students at Seattle Central Community College who participated in the learning community became more involved in college life at their institution. The researchers concluded that collaborative learning programs do make a difference in student involvement and achievement. They encourage other colleges and

universities to construct educational settings using a collaborative learning format in order to enhance student achievement and persistence (Tinto, et al, 1993).

### Student Responses to Learning Communities

One of the major tasks facing a student just entering college is to find their place socially and academically. With an increase in commuting and working students, it is more difficult to make friends on campus. Participating in a learning community is one way students can develop relationships with other students. Students interact and share information while experiencing class together. These relationships help foster the social and intellectual growth in students (Love, 1999; Strommer, 1999).

Some learning community programs are designed for specific student populations such as developmental or honor students. However, most programs recruit strongly from the incoming freshman population or from the entire undergraduate student body. A survey conducted by the Washington Center for Undergraduate Education of 1,000 students enrolled in a learning community found that students in learning communities are average in age and gender to students in traditional classes. Learning community students are also similar to students in traditional classrooms in attitudes towards competition, collaboration, college faculty and self-satisfaction. Where there are differences between students in learning communities and in traditional classes are in college attrition rates (Gabelnick, et al, 1990; Love, 1999; Matthews, 1994).

According to the records at the University of Oregon and Eastern Washington University, students participating in a learning community had higher retention rates than traditional students. At institutions across the country, retention rates of learning

community students were ten to twenty percent higher than typical class averages (Gabelnick, et al, 1990; Love, 1999; MacGregor, 1991; Matthews, 1994). The Learning Community Enrollment Study conducted at North Seattle Community College, Washington during the years between 1986 and 1990 found that students in learning communities were indistinguishable between students in traditional classes. Nevertheless, the learning community students had a slightly higher retention rate, persisted longer, re-enrolled, stayed at college longer, and completed more degrees than students in traditional courses (Matthews, 1994). Researchers note that the higher retention rates exist possibly because students in a learning community are in a program larger than an individual course. These programs provide more social and intellectual support than the traditional course (Gabelnick, et al 1990; Matthews, 1994). A learning community creates an environment of belonging that is an important element that positively effects student retention rates (Tinto, 1987). "It is not simple, procedurally or psychologically to drop such an extensive commitment" (Gabelnick, et al, 1990, p.63).

Another difference between students in learning community programs and traditional classrooms is in student performance rates (Love, 1999; MacGregor, 1991). Across the country, studies comparing the achievement of students in learning communities with those in traditional courses note that the students in learning communities have higher course pass rates. For example, at LaGuardia Community College studies found that student pass rates in the writing link of the learning community were twelve to fourteen percent higher than the general composition population (Gabelnick, et al, 1990). A reason for these higher performance rate statistics



may be that students in a learning community learn in team-taught situations where faculty have more interaction with the students, their work, progress and problems (Cross, 1998; Gabelnick, et al, 1990; Matthews, 1994).

Through qualitative methods, data concerning student responses to their learning community experience can be collected and examined. Some programs ask students to keep journals, write self-evaluations, fill out surveys and program evaluation forms. From these sources, student data has revealed some themes concerning their experiences in a learning community. First, learning community students talk and write about the friendships and sense of belonging that exist in the learning community. This is especially true for the students in larger and commuter institutions. Through the use of collaborative teaching techniques, the students are put in the position to interact and learn together. They experience self-confidence as learners because their teachers and peers listen and respond to their contributions. Students learn that different perspectives exist and they learn to respect other views (Gabelnick, et al, 1990; Lin, Bransford, Hmelo, Kantor, Hickey, Secules, Petrosino & Goldman, 1995).

Another factor noted by students in learning communities was their increased ability to draw meaning from several courses and their ability to apply knowledge from one discipline to another (Gabelnick, et al, 1990). The learning community student's reaction is based on the premise that when "students can see linkages between disciplines it helps in their overall understanding of taking courses out of their majors" (Matthews, 1994, p.193).

Matthews (1994) mentions follow-up data collected in 1990 from students who had participated in the Quanta learning community project at Daytona Beach Community College, Florida from 1984-1989. Of 350 questionnaires sent, 55 responses were received with representation from all five years. The students were asked one question, “looking back, what do you think was most beneficial about your Quanta experience” (p.194). The results reveal that approximately two thirds of the students felt that working in groups, social interactions, and valued friendships were especially valuable. Also, the development of critical thinking skills and personal growth were mentioned (Matthews, 1994).

The majority of students are content with their learning community experience (Gabelnick, et al, 1990; Levine, 1998; Mackay, et al, 1996; Matthews, 1994; Shapiro & Levine, 1999; Smith, 1991). However, not all students express satisfaction with the learning community environment. The most frequent complaint by students is the workload. Many students who drop out thought the learning community would be an easy course. Even though faculty and counselors try to publicize the extent of the workload in a learning community, some students are still unaware of the extensive reading and writing commitments. Further, other students have difficulty understanding the interdisciplinary nature of a learning community and frequently drop out due to content confusion. Still other students have a fear of public learning or of being exposed. These shy or less confident students frequently drop out due to high anxiety levels (Gabelnick, et al, 1990). A collaborative learning environment presents some students with a culturally inappropriate environment. Foreign students frequently have difficulty

with group participation due to a cultural bias that learning occurs only when faculty lecture. Still other students face difficulties after the learning community experience is over and they return to a traditional learning environment. They have adjusted to an interactive approach to learning and now they are returning to a less intimate or less social environment. This can cause adjustment problems for students. To compensate for this loss, some learning community students register for higher level courses taught by learning community faculty. Others register for smaller, more intimate classes, similar to the learning community environment (Gabelnick, et al, 1990).

#### Faculty Responses to Learning Communities

Professors who decide to teach in a learning community enter the process with a variety of expectations and personal agendas. They question the differences between a traditional environment and a learning community. They are concerned about the curriculum of their discipline and whether it will be preserved. They question the time required to participate in a learning community. But, most of all, they are concerned about how their colleagues, linked or clustered, will judge them as teachers (Gabelnick, et al, 1990).

First, faculty receptivity towards teaching in the different learning community models varies according to the size of the institution and the discipline. According to Gabelnick, et al, (1990), the faculty in the sciences seem to be attracted to cluster, linked course and federated learning community models. These models are also the models most attractive to faculty at large institutions. This is in part because these models follow standing course offerings and existing sequencing of the curriculum. The more

integrated coordinated-study learning community model is receptive to faculty in the humanities and social sciences where faculty stress cross-curricular writing, active learning and other integrated approaches to thinking. This model is also more attractive to faculty at smaller institutions.

Each learning community is different because of the different faculty personalities participating in the community. The methods for integrating the disciplines vary from learning community to learning community. Some faculty members choose to keep the disciplinary lines distinct, whereas, other faculty members choose to blend disciplines. Each faculty team decides how they will make connections and how multidisciplinary their learning community will be. Some faculty members integrate their disciplines by theme, whereas others integrate the structure, the pedagogy and the roles of participants (Gabelnick, et al, 1990; Matthews, 1994).

The level of coordination and involvement between faculty also vary according to the learning community. The planning of a first time learning community is usually the most demanding for faculty members. Professors find that after their first participation that the time spent planning translates to their next learning community. However, some faculty become overwhelmed and conclude that the work out ways the rewards of participating in the learning community (Gabelnick, et al, 1990). They note that teaching in a learning community takes away from research and tenure granting activities (Strommer, 1999).

According to Strommer (1999), faculty members respond that when teaching in a learning community environment, they use a “mixed method” approach to teaching.

Lecture, discussion and small group activities are several strategies used by the faculty. Most faculty respond that they do not change their basic teaching methods, but do expand and use a greater variety of teaching strategies. Trying new teaching methods in the security of the learning community helps many faculty to take risks in their teaching.

However, some faculty teaching in a learning community found working with their colleagues to be difficult. They mentioned personality clashes with peers. Some faculty were also uneasy with the idea that, “your teaching methods and content are under the microscope for your faculty peers to observe and critique, which can be intimidating” (Strommer, 1999, p.45). Although most faculty are initially concerned about collaboration with colleagues in their discipline or in other disciplines, participating faculty usually are pleased by the conversations with colleagues about content and pedagogy that emerge from teaching in the learning community (Gabelnick, et al, 1990; Matthews, 1994; Smith & Hunter, 1988). Most faculty appreciate the relationships formed with their colleagues. They enjoy discussing content in a deeper manner and working to create teaching experiences across disciplines (Collison, 1993; Smith & Hunter, 1988; Strommer, 1999). Learning communities can bring together faculty from all age groups and can help bridge generations of professors. New professors can gain insight and knowledge from veteran professors, and the vitality of new professors can energize a veteran professor to approach their teaching with a fresh perspective (Gabelnick, et al, 1990). Finley (1991) interviewed thirty-four professors who had taught in the coordinated learning communities program at Seattle Central Community College. From the interviews she noted that the learning communities experience left most faculty

members feeling, “refreshed, intellectually stimulated and more willing to experiment with new teaching approaches”(p. 11). Finley also found that the learning community experience saved some experienced faculty from leaving the teaching profession altogether (Finley, 1991).

Studies in Washington State have concluded that the learning community initiative draws heavily from mid-career faculty members. This is in part due to the fact that they are highly skilled, have been at an institution for a long time, and are interested in taking on new challenges (Gabelnick, et al, 1990). Such mid-career faculty are most likely to find that teaching in a learning community is a rejuvenating experience (Strommer, 1999).

According to Gabelnick, et al (1990) it is important that the learning community be led by a professor who is a well-respected and established member of the faculty. The number of established faculty involved in the learning community effort on a campus is usually an indicator of the viability of the learning community initiative. Further, Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith indicate that women faculty are extremely visible in the learning community, possibly due to their interests in cooperative and shared power, and their emphasis on the “affective aspects of learning” (p.79).

Many faculty note (Strommer, 1999) that what they value from teaching in a learning community is the establishing of different relationships with students that contribute to a more positive classroom atmosphere. The faculty members feel that students, in a non-threatening environment, are more open, more responsive and more interested in learning. The faculty feels that the learning experience is shared rather than

dictated to students. They note that by getting to know their students, they can identify student problems earlier. As a result, faculty in a learning community, to a greater degree, must be more familiar with student support services and other resources available to students. However, some faculty members experience problems with community development in their learning community. Students participate in an environment that emphasizes collaborative learning techniques and greater student/student and student/faculty interactions. Most community development reinforces positive student traits such as, studying, and peer editing. However, community development relies of the character of the students in the community. Some students take advantage of the learning community environment. For example, faculty members reveal that they have taught in a learning community that reinforced negative student traits such as, cheating, rudeness in class, and cutting class (Strommer, 1999).

The literature reveals (Evenbeck, et al, 1999; Levine, 1998; Love, 1999; Matthews, 1994; Shapiro & Levine, 1999) that a crucial element to successful faculty participation in a learning community is the need for faculty development opportunities. The faculty team needs to learn how to teach in a more learner-centered environment. Therefore, through structured workshops and informal meetings, the participating faculty is presented with issues such as, how to incorporate collaborate learning into their course or how to relate their course to another in the link or cluster. The workshops and meetings further help encourage faculty to make changes in their course syllabi, create common assignments, define interdisciplinary links, and discuss course assessment.

According to Levine, (1998), at Temple University all faculty participating in a learning community must attend one of several offered full-day summer workshops. They receive a stipend for attending. The agenda for the workshops include sessions in each of the following areas: “creating community, innovative pedagogy, and student development” (p.22). The workshops begin with an overview of the learning community program and what it means to teach in a learning community environment. The new learning community faculty listens to presentations from experienced faculty teams about what has and has not worked in their classroom. The teams of faculty meet to talk about their links, teaching styles, expectations. The workshop provides the teams with planning times necessary for developing their learning community. All faculty members receive a copy of Temple’s *Learning Communities Guidelines* which addresses expectations, concerns and procedures. On pedagogy issues, the learning community workshop focuses on collaborative learning, effective teaching and learning strategies, and classroom assessment. Also, during the summer workshop, participants focus on student development issues such as student social transition to college. Student affairs personnel on Temple’s campus share information concerning sessions on group dynamics, technology and student activities. The summer workshops provide the groundwork for Temple’s learning community faculty that continues to develop once the semester begins. The faculty meets regularly during the semester to continue dialogue about the learning community and student progress. At mid-semester the learning community faculty administers a brief course evaluation to all participating students. This provides information necessary for making course adjustments. The students again evaluate the



learning communities program at the end of the semester. This information provides insight into both student attitudes and student experiences in a learning community (Levine, 1998).

Consequently, despite concerns, many faculty members are attracted to participation in a learning community because of the opportunity to share and learn from colleagues, and the opportunity for creativity and experimentation. The faculty member has the opportunity to share the responsibility of learning with their colleagues and with the students (Collison, 1993; Decker, 1998; Gabelnick, et al, 1990; Matthews, 1986). They develop relationships between faculty and students (Strommer, 1999). They are now only one of several sources of knowledge that the student can draw from in a student-centered teaching environment. The faculty also participates in team meetings and in faculty development workshops to help them effectively make the changes needed for teaching in a learning community (Evenbeck, et al, 1999; Levine, 1998). Through collaboration between faculty and students, and faculty and faculty, there develops a concept of shared learning ( Evenbeck, et al, 1999; Gabelnick, et al, 1990).

### Future of Learning Communities

An in-depth review of the literature revealed that learning community ideals are well grounded in educational traditions and in contemporary educational movements. Various models have been adapted at colleges and universities to fit the goals and mission of an institution. Many colleges and universities today are innovators in the learning communities' movement. These innovative institutions have developed conditions that must be met for successful implementation of learning communities.

They have shared their successes and concerns with the academic world and they have discussed student and faculty perspectives towards participation in learning communities.

Despite all the discussion concerning learning communities, learning communities will never replace traditional courses and disciplines. In fact, learning communities usually exist with regular course offerings in a college. However, they will become increasingly widespread and will provide another avenue for student learning (Gabelnick, et al, 1990; Levine, et al, 1999; Smith, 1991). The restructuring of curriculum to learning communities will provide an approach to many issues facing higher education. Concerns about retention, curricular coherence, transfer, and the integration of skills and content, are all addressed in learning community reform (Smith, 1991).

At a time when higher education appears to be moving away from a sense of shared purpose and community, learning communities offer a way to maintain the balance between striving for oneself and contributing to the common good (Gabelnick, et al, 1990, p.89).

Learning communities also help connect disciplines and share knowledge which quite often traditional courses fail to do. Learning communities encourage faculty to experiment with their teaching techniques and to test contemporary learning styles. Learning communities break down the barriers between faculty trained in different disciplines and give the faculty the chance to pursue an interdisciplinary approach to teaching. In a learning community faculty, staff, students, and administrators must work together as a whole, which can revitalize an institution with fresh ideas. At all levels,

participants learn cooperation, communication, and coordination. In order for our culture to survive, our colleges and universities need to “shape the behaviors that shape public behavior. Teaching is a political act; regardless of our disciplines, whatever we teach, and whatever our individual political points of view, our overriding obligation is to educate a citizenry” (Gabelnick, et al, 1990, p.92).

As more evidence of success of learning communities becomes available to the higher education community, more institutions may consider learning communities as part of their efforts to improve teaching and learning on their campuses (Gardner & Levine, 1999).

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

#### Introduction

Many empirical learning community studies have been conducted at institutions with large grant funding projects, such as La Guardia Community College, or where the entire institution centers around a learning community initiative, such as Evergreen State College. Most of these initiatives are primarily of the more sophisticated coordinated studies or team-taught models. A review of the literature revealed minimal documented studies at institutions, especially community colleges, involved with learning communities on a smaller, more cost efficient scale. The purpose of this study was to observe the adaptation of a learning community, linked model at a community college setting where learning communities were in their initial phase with no grant or supplemental funding and minimal administrative support. The researcher examined the attitudes, perceptions and feelings of students, faculty and administrators participating in a learning community initiative in order to find out what they viewed as the strengths and weakness of the learning communities program. The researcher then compared the qualitative results from the study with the conditions for successful implementation of learning communities. An examination of the collected data with the comparative conditions provided the researcher with suggestions to improve the current learning communities initiative at the community college, to broaden institutional support, and to increase student, faculty and administrative participation.

According to Levine, et al, (1999), in order to avoid a narrow definition of success for learning communities, the researcher must capture the full context of student and faculty experiences in the learning community. A learning community is not a simple environment but is comprised of numerous social and academic interactions. In the learning community itself there are student/student, faculty/student and faculty/faculty interactions. Therefore, the literature refers to “multiple measures” of assessment as the best means to gather data from all these levels of interaction (Ketcheson & Levine, 1999). Ketcheson and Levine (1999) advise researchers of learning communities to use a variety of assessment tools. “Surveys, individual interviews, focus groups, ethnography or field research, participant observation, classroom assessment techniques, student portfolios, self-assessment, or reflective journals are some tools appropriate to collecting assessment information in learning communities” (p.100).

As the research indicates, “colleges that wish to institute learning communities on their own campuses, however, should begin small” (Adams & Hunycutt, 1988, p.3). The literature states that linked courses are the most simplistic of the learning community models (Gabelnick, et al, 1990; Levine & Shapiro, 1999). Therefore, the researcher selected the linked course model for this study rather than a more elaborate model such as student cohorts in larger classes or team taught programs. However, at the last minute the administration at the urban campus added a psychology course to that linked community, thus creating a clustered learning community.

The researcher examined two learning community initiatives (one linked and one clustered) at a community college and surveyed and interviewed, through focus group techniques, the professors and students participating in the existing learning communities to understand their perspectives on the effectiveness of linked courses. To gain a broader perspective of the implementation of learning communities, several administrators involved in the learning community effort were asked to participate in a separate focus group. The researcher also examined compiled narratives from both faculty and students in order to further assess the student's attitudes and perceptions about participation in a learning community. By using the qualitative method of triangulation, the researcher observed an emergence of similar patterns and themes that helped validate the findings. Triangulation can be defined as, "using multiple investigators, multiple sources of data or multiple methods to confirm the emerging findings" (Merriam, 1988, p.169).

In addition, the literature review recognizes numerous conditions that need to be satisfied to successfully implement a learning community. During data analysis the researcher examined the data as it related to the implementation conditions of: learning community ownership, model selection, faculty selection, student recruitment, partnerships between academic and student affairs, funding, and ongoing assessment. These conditions were used as benchmarks to help validate the emerging patterns and themes in the findings, and to help the researcher determine whether the learning communities in question were successful.

### Site Sample

The researcher selected the community college setting for conducting this research study due to the nature of the environment. The open-door policy, the transient environment, the non-traditional student population, the abundance of remedial courses, and the poor retention rates are factors that exist at all institutions of higher learning, however, they appear to be more prevalent at the community college ( Bystrom, 1999; Matthews, 1986). Consequently, these factors, along with the fact that there are a minimal number of documented, community college linked-learning community studies, makes the community college a challenging place to try and develop a sense of community among students and faculty.

The community college in this case study is located in a Mid-Atlantic metropolitan area. The College has grown from 400 students when it opened its doors in 1967 into the state's largest and most comprehensive community college offering associate degrees and certificates in 65 program areas at two campuses and 17 community sites. Today, the college serves more than 27,000 residents annually through credit and non-credit programming. This institution is a proponent of the "open door" admissions policy. This attracts a large number of students who are academically unprepared for traditional college studies. At the community college, students are given a basic skills placement test before admission. Based on test results, many students are placed in remedial courses prior to admittance into college credit courses. The community college offers these students remedial courses in reading, writing and math skills. However, these courses are offered in isolation and the unprepared student is

restricted from taking most college credit courses. It is only after remediation is completed that the community college remedial student enters traditional college courses. Sherman (1976) points out that quite often information taught in the remedial course does not transfer to the academic course content. Also, students do not see the relevance of the basic skills courses. Other courses taken during remediation are selected by the students from a list of courses approved by the area deans. These approved courses are primarily low readability courses, such as, basic keyboarding, dance and movement, college success, basic drawing.

Recently, at the community college, a learning community committee was formed to discuss the possibility of adapting the linked course model, and pairing remedial courses in the hopes of addressing retention and student learning issues. Proponents of learning communities (Hill, 1985; Levine et al, 1999; Matthews, 1994; Smith, 1991; Spence & Campbell, 1996; Tinto & Goodsell, 1993) have found that the simultaneous integration of skill courses or, the integration of a skill course with a content course, increases student learning, retention rates and student motivational levels. During the Spring 2000 semester, there was a linked Reading III and Writing III learning communities offered on the main campus and a clustered Reading III, Writing III, Basic Psychology learning community offered at the urban campus of the community college for which students co-registered.

The Learning Communities Committee at the community college had set up campus wide guidelines for any faculty member teaching in a learning community environment. These guidelines were established to provide on-going feedback to the



Learning Communities Committee for the purpose of continued program improvement. The guidelines helped prepare the professor for teaching in the learning community and suggested steps to follow throughout the semester in terms of faculty/faculty contact, student conferences, end of the semester evaluation, and post-semester reports.

(Appendix A) The Committee also provided participating faculty with a handout for students which listed student expectations for participation in a learning community.

(Appendix B) A pre and post course survey, and a narrative assignment were standard assessment tools, designed and provided by the Learning Communities Committee, for all faculty teaching in a learning community to distribute to their students. These measures insured standardized assessment for all the learning community initiatives at the community college (Appendix C, Appendix D, Appendix E, Appendix F). As a result, qualitative data was collected through these assessment tools that helped the researcher determine the strengths and weaknesses of student and faculty participation in a learning community.

### Sampling

According to Merriam (1988) nonprobability sampling is the method selected in qualitative case studies. In this method of sampling “there is no way of estimating the probability that each element has of being included in the sample and no assurance that every element has some chance of being included” (p.47). The most common form of nonprobabilistic sampling is criterion-based sampling. Criterion-based sampling “requires that one establish the criteria, bases, or standards necessary for units to be included in the investigation, one then finds a sample that matches these criteria”

(Merriam, 1988, p.48). Of the criterion-based sampling strategies the researcher used a typical-case selection strategy. The researcher took a sample of what one would call typical, normal or average for a particular phenomenon (Merriam, 1988). An assessment of the learning community environment was conducted on the typical-case sampling of both students and faculty participating in the learning community initiative. The researcher systematically assessed the sample of learning community students and faculty by using data collection techniques that were practical and focused on specific questions. A flexible design was used and the collected data was systematically organized to help locate emerging patterns and themes (Ketcheson & Levine, 1999). By following a systematic approach to data collection the researcher avoided the risks that too much or too little information would be collected, or that the information collected would not answer the research questions (Ketcheson & Levine, 1999). The researcher secured qualitative data from typical-case sampling that answered some key questions. What needs to be done to improve the learning communities program? And what impact does the learning communities program have on student, faculty and administrative attitudes and expectations?

### Research Design

A qualitative case study approach was used to view the student, faculty and administrative attitudes and feelings concerning the strengths and weaknesses of participation in a learning community at a unique community college, and whether these findings were similar to learning community implementation conditions found in the literature.

Prior to the study, the researcher prepared a formal agreement indicating the obligations of the observer and the host. The students signed consent forms in order to participate in the study (Appendix G). The researcher discussed the confidentiality of data, sources and reports with the classes and then again prior to focus group participation.

The studied sample were the students, faculty and administrators involved in the learning community initiative at a community college with a small learning communities program.

In designing the study it was important to have a profile of each student participating in the learning community. The researcher needed to be familiar with specifics concerning the students' backgrounds and characteristics for an in-depth interpretation of the data. Student demographic information was obtained from a demographic data profile collected from the participating students. This information included the student's sex, age, grade point average, and courses completed at the community college (Appendix H).

### Survey.

According to Palomba and Banta (1999), a survey is "a method of collecting information from people about their characteristics, behaviors, attitudes or perceptions. Surveys most often take the form of questionnaires" (p.180). These authors note that surveys offer one of the best approaches for studying the attitudes and values of students in education programs. Students can be in the best position to examine whether what faculty are doing is working.

Twice during the semester, at the beginning and end of the semester, all the students participating in the learning communities under study were surveyed, using a questionnaire format, concerning their participation in the learning community. The students were asked to respond to open-ended questions. Open-ended questions ask the respondents to write their own answers rather than to choose from given responses. This provided for answers that were not anticipated (Palomba & Banta, 1999). A draft of the survey questions was circulated to faculty on the learning community committee for their review. Their comments led to a second draft of survey questions that were pilot tested with a number of students at the institution during the fall 1999 semester.

The questionnaires were distributed in class and the students had until the next class session to return the survey. The survey questions were distributed to the participating learning community students during the second week of the spring 2000 semester and then a follow-up survey was administered during the last two weeks of the semester (Tinto & Love, 1995). The purpose of the survey was to gather information concerning the student's perspective of their previous learning experiences, to determine why students chose the learning community, and to examine the student's goals from participation in the learning community (Appendix C, Appendix D). The surveys were also used by the professors to monitor the progress of the course, make changes as necessary, and by the learning community's leadership for assessing the learning community initiative.

The two survey evaluation forms were prepared in collaboration with the Learning Communities Committee at the community college in order to keep assessment

tools consistent throughout the campus-wide learning communities' initiative. Any learning community existing on campus, regardless of participation in the study under question, were administered these assessment measures.

#### Focus group interviews.

Initially, from the student demographic information, the researcher had planned to select a sample of eight students from the two learning communities under study to serve as a shadow study group. These students would have been the only student participants interviewed by the researcher using focus group techniques. However, the number of students enrolled in the two learning communities that remained in the initiative at the end of the semester was so minimal that the study did not warrant a shadow study. Consequently, the researcher with the flexibility of the design in mind, altered the design of the study to exclude the shadow study piece. All participating students were included in the focus group interviews. The questions asked during the interviews varied from questions similar to the survey, to more personal questions concerning the course (Appendix I). Thus, the two learning communities, consisting of thirty enrolled students, were surveyed, wrote final narratives and participated in a focus group interview in order to see if their responses supported or rejected the responses of other students in the learning community. The researcher also used focus group techniques to interview all five participating professors and a selected group of six administrators actively involved in the learning communities' project. As their primary assessment tool, Smith and MacGregor (1991) interview faculty teams at the end of each semester to assess teaching experiences at all the Washington state learning communities initiatives. Based on the

research of Smith and MacGregor (1991) the faculty and administrative focus group questions varied from the student questions, and focused more on the faculty and administrative perspectives concerning learning communities (Appendix J, Appendix K).

A focus group is a group interview conducted with 4-12 participants in a casual setting. A focus group moderator keeps the interview flowing and facilitates conversation in the group (Cohen & Engleberg, 1989; Creason, 1991). A focus group is comprised of individuals that are brought together only once and not individuals that work together over time. Groups that meet regularly to discuss assessment issues are discussion groups and not focus groups. The group is brought together for an in-depth discussion of a “narrowly defined topic” (Palomba & Banta, 1999, p.204). A small number of questions are developed prior to the discussion and serve as the core for the dialogue. The purpose of a focus group is to permit the participants to openly express their attitudes and opinions about a specific issue in an anonymous setting. Participants are encouraged to respond and interact with each other (Brodigan, 1991; Palomba & Banta, 1999; Parsons, 1994). Focus group research began in the social sciences and is a technique often used in marketing research for data collection and descriptive analysis. The use of focus groups in educational and organizational settings has not been as commonplace. However, recently focus groups have become popular in the evaluation of student programs since the focus group researcher has the ability to personally experience the opinions and attitudes of respondents (Byers & Wilcox, 1998; Franklin & Knight, 1995). This method of data collection is qualitative in nature and provides the researcher with information less in the way of a prepared interview. During the group interview, the

researcher matches verbal and nonverbal cues to determine the attitudes of the respondents. The dialogue of the interview process is free flowing between a moderator and the participants. Data can be collected by audio tape-recording the interview. A recorder or note-taker, other than the moderator, can be used to take notes or minutes of the group interview (Creason, 1991). The researcher then transcribes the recordings and organizes the notes by question for a permanent record of the focus group sessions. When organized by question, the researcher sorts and codes the responses into broad categories (Ketcheson & Levine, 1999). Besides gathering information concerning the various kinds of attitudes and opinions held by the participants, the focus group provides exploration into why these attitudes and opinions were held (Palomba & Banta, 1999; Parsons, 1994).

According to the literature, to draw confident conclusions, researchers need to replicate focus groups (Palomba & Banta, 1999). More than one focus group must be conducted for each type of participant since historically, a focus group is brought together only once. Krueger (1994) recommends six to nine people per group and three to four replications for each type of group (Palomba & Banta, 1999).

The researcher planned to replicate two student focus groups composed of students randomly selected from participation in the institution's current learning community initiative. The researcher wanted to avoid forming focus groups that were exclusive to one learning community on campus. Therefore, the researcher planned to select eight students from each linked learning community to participate in the focus group interview process. The sixteen students were to be placed into one of two

replicated focus groups. The groups were to consist of four students from each linked learning community. This would have created two focus groups of eight students each, four of which were from a different linked learning community and who were unfamiliar with the other student participants. However, this ideal structure for the student focus groups never developed due to the lack of student participants. The researcher and moderator had to restructure the focus group design to meet the emergent changes in the case under study. Only one student focus group, consisting of students from both learning communities was held. Further, a focus group composed of the five learning community faculty, and a focus group composed of seven administrators were interviewed using focus group techniques and questions structured to gain a faculty and an administrative perspective of learning communities (Appendix J, Appendix K). The researcher audio tape-recorded these sessions, transcribed the recordings, and then organized the notes by question for a permanent record of the focus group sessions.

There are two types of group interviews that are used in focus group research. First, an unstructured interview is an open window technique where group discussion follows after the presentation of a very general statement. A structure interview, although flexible, is structured around particular questions with relative control of the group and discussion (Creason, 1991). The researcher used a structured interview format in order to retain some consistency in questioning between the student focus group session (Appendix I), the faculty focus group (Appendix J) and the administrative focus group (Appendix K).



According to Creason (1991), it is important in focus group interviewing that the moderator emphasize that the opinions and attitudes of all participants are needed, even if they conflict with others in the group. The moderator's involvement can be "low ended" or "high ended." At the low end, moderators play a minor role in the group discussion and try to keep the interview as non-directive as possible. Conversely, at the high end, the moderator controls both topic and group dynamics. In this role, the moderator must be conscious of not leading the respondent's voice to reflect that of the moderator. A moderator's job in the focus group is to guide, enhance, cue, expand and listen (Creason, 1991). The researcher used an independent, trained moderator who structured the interview in a high-ended format in order to maintain consistent direction during the three focus group sessions. The researcher met with the moderator prior to the focus group interviews to discuss procedures and interview questions.

A strength of focus groups is that results can be gathered rather quickly. Insights into a problem can be gained almost immediately. Focus groups are also helpful in validating information already collected (Palomba & Banta, 1999). For example, the researcher used data collected from the focus group to clarify survey and narrative results.

### Narratives.

The final project for the students in the paired and clustered courses was to write a narrative about their experiences in the learning community (Appendix E). The participating faculty also wrote a narrative of their experiences teaching the course (Appendix F). The researcher examined the compiled set of narratives and both

individually and collectively assessed student and faculty perceptions and attitudes concerning participation in the learning community.

### Data Analysis

According to MacGregor (1993), an evaluation of learning communities involves two related agendas: proving and improving. An evaluation for proving involves collecting data that can be used by both internal and external audiences. Evaluation for improving is performed to gather data for internal purposes of program enhancement only. The goals and objectives of the survey, focus group interviews and narratives were to acquire information that would help prove and improve the learning community initiative at this unique community college (Ketcheson & Levine, 1999).

To initially analyze the data from the two learning communities under study, the researcher used a patterns and themes strategy. This strategy focused on emergent themes and common threads in the data. The data from the questionnaires, focus group interviews and narratives were recorded by question, coded by participant response and then analyzed using a thematic content analysis to look for similarities and differences in attitudes and perceptions among the participants in the learning community environment. After the researcher had studied each “case” individually, a cross-case analysis was performed. The researcher attempted to discover relevant outcomes that occurred across the two cases and that were similar or in opposition to the learning community theory documented in the literature. A cross-case analysis can strengthen the interpretations drawn from specific data since the researcher is looking for similar patterns and themes that are common to both learning community sections. Further, the researcher examined

to what capacity the conditions for successful implementation of learning communities were evident in the data findings. Due to the large quantities of data, the researcher charted by question, for analysis, the responses from the surveys, narratives, and focus groups. This meta-matrix, or large chart, organized by the researcher, arranged the data according to student, faculty and administrative responses to survey, narrative and focus group responses. The researcher compared, through content analysis, the responses in an organized manner examining noticeable patterns and themes. The researcher found themes that were woven into a useful framework for others interested in teaching in learning communities on their campus.

#### Biases with Focus Groups, Surveys and Narratives

There are many valid criticisms of focus group research. The literature, on focus groups, tends to revolve around the issues of “generalizability, objectivity, reliability, and validity” (Franklin & Knight, 1995, p.6).

Quantitative researchers note that the small sample size of a focus group interview can not be representative of a total population. Therefore, the researcher needed to be aware of any limitations introduced into the results of the study due to differences between the group of students included in the study and the overall population of eligible learning community students (Palomba & Banta, 1999). Also, objectivity is effected when the researcher is both the observer and the analyst. If the researcher functions as the moderator, they must avoid interjecting their opinions into the group conversation and must use sound qualitative data analysis methods (Franklin & Knight, 1995). To avoid these problems, the researcher used an independent, trained moderator and a data auditing

process in this study. The researcher asked the independent moderator to assess the findings of the focus group interviews. Both the researcher and the independent moderator arrived at their own findings. The researcher and moderator then discussed their individual analyses and discussed differences, trying to seek a consensus in their results. In focus group research reliability is not a factor since the purpose of the focus group interview is to understand attitudes and opinions rather than to find consistent results to test reality (Franklin & Knight, 1995). Validity is an appropriate match of the data collected to the research objectives. A valid focus group has, “clearly defined objectives, good recruiting of quality participants, competent moderating, and exacting analysis of data. It was the researcher’s responsibility to follow procedures so that there were few discrepancies between stated attitudes and actual behavior” (Franklin & Knight, 1995, p.6). If the respondents were not honest in their comments the validity of the study could be affected. As LeCompe and Goetz (1992) note, informants may “lie, omit relevant data, or misrepresent their claims” (p.46).

To reduce biases in designing surveys, the researcher tried to avoid some common pitfalls discussed in the literature (Palomba & Banta, 1999). The items needed to be clearly worded and simple with no ambiguous terms. Also, the researcher avoided leading respondents into providing particular answers. Further, each question stood alone and required only one response. The layout of the questions appeared in a logical order starting with the more general questions and progressing to more specific responses. Instructions were clearly stated and the researcher determined whether the surveys were to be anonymously answered (Palomba & Banta, 1999). The researcher in this study, in

conjunction with the Learning Communities Committee prepared two surveys that follow these guidelines. Again, the surveys were prepared by the researcher with the Learning Communities Committee at the community college in order to keep assessment tools consistent throughout the campus wide learning communities' initiative. The Committee decided to keep the surveys anonymous to hopefully obtain more candid responses. If the students, who were being graded in these courses, identify themselves, the results could be partial to the grading process. However, even though they were told they did not have to identify themselves, all the students in the learning communities put their names on their surveys. This information did help the researcher in constructing an analysis between individual student, pre and post survey results. The surveys were pre-tested with students in other learning community sections at the community college, not under study in order to help create better evaluation tools.

As another way to help minimize the above biases, the researcher used triangulation, bringing more than one source of data to bear on a single point (Merriam, 1988). In this study, triangulation was achieved by the use of surveys, focus groups, and narratives.

In summary, the researcher collected standard demographic information for each student to examine whether the student population of the learning community was typical or atypical of the traditional college classroom. Surveys were utilized at the beginning and at the end of the semester to examine the student's perceptions and attitudes concerning participation in the learning community for the purpose of determining why the students participated in the learning community, and what they viewed as the

strengths and weaknesses of participation. At the end of the semester, the students and faculty wrote a narrative about their classroom experiences in the learning community. The incorporation of a faculty narrative with the student responses provided a complete portfolio of the learning community experience. Further, to help validate the qualitative data collected from the surveys and narratives, the researcher conducted several focus group discussions with students, faculty and administrators. The researcher then related the findings from the study with the conditions for successful implementation of a learning community. An examination of the collected data and the comparative conditions provided the researcher with suggestions for the improvement of the current learning community initiative.

## Chapter 4

### Analysis of the Data

#### Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine two learning community initiatives at a community college where learning communities are in their initial phase. The researcher utilized demographic profiles, surveys, narratives and focus groups to examine student, faculty and administrative perceptions and attitudes concerning their participation in a learning community, in order to determine what they viewed as the positives and negatives of the initiative. By using the qualitative method of triangulation, the researcher captured a full context of student, faculty and administrative experiences with learning communities. The literature refers to the various conditions that must be satisfied to successfully implement a learning community. These conditions were the benchmarks for the validation of emerging patterns and themes found in the data, and they helped the researcher determine whether the learning communities under study were successful. Further, from the analysis of the data the researcher suggested how to improve, broaden, and increase student, faculty and administrative support for the current learning communities' initiative. These suggestions could be applied to other institutional commitments to learning communities.

#### Data Findings

During the spring 2000 semester the researcher collected data from two learning communities. One of the learning communities was on the college's main campus. It was a Reading III/ Writing III linked learning community with 15 students initially

enrolled and with nine students completing the semester. The second learning community under study was a clustered Reading III/Writing III/ Basic Psychology learning community on the college's urban campus with 15 students initially enrolled and eight students completing the semester. During the semester the faculty members in each learning community met together to discuss curriculum, students and community activities. Both learning communities had a minimal budget for additional activities to help build community. The faculty from the learning community on the main campus used the funds to purchase a hard covered dictionary for each student in the learning community. They made name plates for the texts and personally signed each dictionary. The learning community on the urban campus was more involved in additional activities to develop community. The students had read an essay about a homeless man that generated an activity to take sandwiches to a homeless shelter. The urban students made the sandwiches and delivered them to a local shelter. They then returned to the campus for a pizza party to celebrate their accomplishments. Further, the same learning community went out to dinner together to celebrate a student's birthday. All these activities were arranged to help the students feel like they were part of a community.

#### Demographic Profile Data

For purposes of this study, the researcher obtained student information from a demographic data profile survey. This information included the student's age, sex, ethnicity, major field of study, accumulated credits, reasons for enrolling in the learning community and number of semesters enrolled at the college. This information provided



the researcher with a profile of the individual learning communities and with a demographic overview of the entire research population.

On the main campus, 11 of the 15 enrolled students completed the demographic profile surveys that were distributed during the first weeks of the semester. The data indicates that the students ranged in age from 18 years to 34 years. The average age of the community was 20-21 years of age. The learning community was composed of seven Caucasian students, one Hispanic student and three African American students. There were seven males and four females in the learning community. All of the students were United States citizens with English as their native language. Only one student had attended another community college, whereas, the majority of the learning community students were in their first semester. Most students were attending the community college to earn a degree or for transfer credits. Only two students indicated that they hoped to enhance their job skills by attending a community college. The students had a wide range of interests regarding their fields of study. Several students were interested in the field of criminal justice. Other areas with individual interests were business, culinary arts, accounting, American Sign Language, and art. Several students were undecided in selecting a field of study.

Of the 15 students enrolled in the clustered learning community on the college's urban campus, 12 students completed the demographic survey. The average age of the 12 students completing the demographic profile survey was 20-21 years of age. There were only three students over the age of 21 in the community. The learning community cluster was composed of ten African Americans, two Hispanics and no Caucasian students. All

the students were American citizens with English as their native language. Of the completed surveys, 11 of the 12 students in the learning community were female. Only one student had attended another community college. An equal number of students had enrolled at the community college to earn transfer credits and to earn a degree or certificate. The students had a wide variety of major fields of study ranging from elementary/secondary education (2), psychology (3), business management (1), criminal justice (3), and human resources (1). Only one student was undecided about their major. From the 12 surveys, it was the first semester for eight of the students and the second semester for four of the students.

### Survey Data

Twice during the semester, at the beginning and at the end of the semester, all the students participating in the learning communities were surveyed using an open-ended questionnaire format that examined their participation in the learning community. The researcher created surveys in collaboration with the participating faculty. The surveys were distributed in the reading class and the students had until the next class session to return the surveys. The purpose of the surveys was to gather information concerning the student's perspective of their previous learning experiences, to determine why students selected the learning community and to examine the student's goals and reactions to participation in the learning community. The results of the surveys were used not only by the researcher but also by the professors to monitor the progress of the course and to make necessary changes in their learning communities. For Survey I, urban campus, eight of the 15 enrolled students returned the survey. At the end of the semester four of

the remaining eight students returned Survey II. On the main campus, of the 15 enrolled students in the learning community, nine of the students returned Survey I. At the end of the semester, eight of the nine remaining students returned Survey II. Totally, 17 of the initial 30 students enrolled in the two learning communities returned Survey I, and 12 of the 17 remaining students at the end of the semester returned Survey II. However, only three students from the urban campus and three students from the main campus filled out both Survey I and Survey II. This resulted due to attrition and random absences on the two days that surveys were distributed.

The researcher charted the collected results from Survey I urban campus, Survey I main campus, Survey II urban campus and Survey II main campus. This meta-matrix arranged the data according to the student responses for each question. For purposes of analysis, the students were assigned a number to distinguish their comments for Survey I and Survey II (Appendix L).

#### Survey I results.

The results from Survey I indicate that the majority of students on both campuses did not know what a learning community was. One student mentioned, "I did not choose the learning community because I didn't know anything about it." Students entered the learning community for a variety of reasons. Some students selected the learning community link or cluster to fit their schedule. Students noted, "It was an open course." and, "the way the schedule was set up for the courses offered." Other students selected the learning community due to the guidance of their advisor or counselor. Comments like, "my advisor chose this learning community" and "the guidance counselor signed me

up” were common. However, the students did indicate that their counselors explained the concept of a learning community to them, thus, leaving the final decision for selecting the learning community up to the student. “When I was doing my schedule my advisor told me that studies have shown that students do well when they work together. Then she told what exactly is a learning community, so then I decided to take these classes.” After an explanation of the concept, several students responded that they selected the learning community because, “I thought it would be a good idea to learn with the same people everyday” and “I choose the learning community because I thought it would help me learn better.”

When asked in Survey I what their goals were for participation in the learning community, the students on both campuses answered unanimously that their goal was to “pass the class,” “to get a good grade” and “to learn to read and write better.” Only two students indicated that their goal was “to interact with and study with other students” or “to make friends.”

Further, the survey asked students whether their previous overall learning experiences had been positive or negative. Eight of the nine students returning the survey on the main campus felt that their learning experiences had been positive. They noted various reasons such as, helpful and caring high school teachers, their own hard work and their own positive approach to learning. The majority of students on the urban campus responded that their previous learning experiences were positive since, “I try to make every experience in my life positive” and “they are positive because I have learned to ask for help.” However, three of the students from the urban campus responded to the

question with the current semester in mind and not their previous learning experiences. This is evident by their responses that, “ So far it’s been overwhelming. Due to my pregnancy, home life and school, it’s kind of hard to keep up with my assignments. They seem to be back to back” and comments like, “more negative than positive because all my papers are one on top of the other.”

When asked why they returned to college this semester the majority of students responded that they wanted to further their education, finish their basic skills courses and get a degree. Some students noted the nice environment, the nice teachers and that the school is inexpensive. However, most students returned for personal reasons such as, “to prove to myself that I can be something and do something with my age.”

#### Analysis of survey I.

When asked why they selected the learning community it was obvious that the students had no idea what a learning community was. Most of the students were placed in the learning community due to schedule needs. However, during the registration process several counselors took the initiative to explain the learning community philosophy to the students and suggest the learning community as a positive learning alternative. Many of the students followed the counselor’s direction and enrolled in the learning community. The almost unanimous placement of students into the two learning communities by counselors indicates that an understanding of what a learning community constitutes is not public knowledge to the student body as a whole. One of the seven conditions for the successful implementation of learning communities states that learning communities need to be well marketed in order to draw student interest. The literature

suggests (Gabelnick, et al, 1990; Levine & Tompkins, 1996) that the students need to learn about learning communities through student orientation sessions, peer advising and peer mentoring opportunities. It was obvious that the counselors were the only marketing tool being used at the community college under study to encourage student participation in learning communities. The students in the learning community initiative had not received literature, flyers, or brochures that described the program and that stated reasons for participating in a learning community.

When asked about their goals for the learning community all the students responded with their personal academic needs in mind. The student's main concerns were to pass the courses and move to the next level. However, many students did emphasize that they hoped to learn something during the semester such as, "to get out of these basic skills classes and learn things the proper or correct way." "To finish and be able to write and read better." These are responses common to all college students and not unique to students in a learning community. Only two students responded specifically to their participation in the learning community noting that their goal was to interact well with other students and make friends.

It was interesting to note that when asked about their previous learning experiences the majority of students mentioned that they had been positive. All of the students in both learning communities were remedial students placed in academic skills reading and writing sections. The researcher would have suspected that more students would have indicated that their previous learning experiences had been negative due to the nature of their present academic status.

When asked why they returned to campus this semester the students again responded in a manner similar to any returning college student, “to earn more credits,” “to enhance my job skills,” and “to further my education.”

Thus, the student responses in the initial survey disseminated during the first weeks of the semester, support the idea that the participating students had no idea of what a learning community was when they completed this survey. They were average college students responding to a questionnaire about learning communities with no actual knowledge of the community they were part of. Thus, Survey I provided the researcher with baseline information concerning student knowledge of learning communities. Survey II, distributed during the final week of the semester, provided more insights into how the reactions and perceptions of students in a learning community were shaped during the semester.

### Survey II results.

During the final week of the semester the remaining learning community students were asked to reflect on the semester and to answer a final survey concerning their completed experiences in the learning community. They responded to questions such as:

1. Were their goals for this learning community met?
2. Had the learning community changed their attitude toward school?
3. If they were a teacher in the learning community what would they change?
4. What they liked about the learning community.
5. Would they advise other students to participate in a learning community?
6. Would they be returning to college, and why?

The majority of students when asked whether their goals for the learning community were met, responded, “yes,” and related their goals to their own academic success. Students noted, “I learned a lot.” “I feel more comfortable writing and with reading understanding.” “Yes, I’m more into reading than I was before.” “My goals were met because my reading speed has improved.” Several students mentioned goals they achieved that were related specifically to their participation in the learning community. For example, students stated, “Yes, I met some new friends.” “Yes, my goals in the learning community were met, for I wanted to learn how to work with others. Now I know how.”

When asked whether the learning community had changed their attitude towards school, most of the students felt that the learning community had a positive influence on their attitude. Several students noted, “It has given me a positive attitude toward school. I was afraid to be here in the beginning, but with everyone helping each other I felt more confident.” “Yes, the learning community has changed my attitude towards school because we all worked together.” “Yes, my attitude toward school is better than ever. I learned that you can have a nice relationship with your teacher and classmates.” The most repeated response was, “I met new friends.”

As a teacher, what they would change in the learning community drew interesting student responses. Even though many students responded, “I don’t think I would change anything,” many negatives relating to their academic experiences seemed to be drawn out in this question. Students appeared to want to change the curriculum and the rules to fit their personal needs. For example, students noted, “I would give the students more time



in class to write their papers.” “No homework, no exams.” “Attendance policy – if you know what your doing you shouldn’t have to come.” “I would really take out the journal stuff.”

The majority of students when asked what they liked about the learning community responded that they enjoyed getting to know their peers and their teachers on a more intimate level. Students felt that, “I met a lot of nice people in the learning community.” “It was small classes and good teachers.” “I like getting to know the other students which made me feel comfortable in the class.” “”You get to know people.” “I liked how the teachers and students all worked together.” “Doing things together besides classwork and going out in the community together.” “The teachers talked to each other.”

All the students noted in the survey that they would recommend the learning community to another student. They stated several reasons for referring others, such as, “you can learn a lot easier because classes are a lot smaller.” “If they needed help I would suggest it to them.” “I would advise another student to take the learning community because it helps students to make friends, and it also helps them to better able themselves to help other people.”

Only the students that completed the semester answered Survey II, thus, it would be expected that when asked whether they would return next semester, the answer would be a unanimous “yes.” Many students listed their reasons for returning as, “I do plan on attending school next semester. I like money and the only way I can get it is if I continue to go to school.” “I want to be able to have a career and live on my own.” However, it was interesting to note some additional factors directly related to the learning community

that influenced that decision. Students explained that, “The learning community made me want to come back because I’m more confident.” “Being in the community.” “Yes, because while school is a challenge, it is also very fun.” “Yes, I hoped I could get this type of class again.”

### Analysis of survey II.

When students in the survey were asked to state whether their goals had been met in the learning community, the majority of students related their goals to their own academic achievements such as, increased reading ability, improved essay writing and a greater knowledge of psychological theories. Only a few students measured their success to the learning community experience. Those students noted, “yes, my goals in the learning community were met for I wanted to learn how to work with others. Now I know how.” It was notable that all the students in Survey II mentioned that the learning community had positively changed their attitude towards school. All the students emphasized the relationships they had developed with peers, and even with faculty, as the reasons for their improved attitudes.

Only a few students responded to the question concerning the changes they would make to the learning community. Those students that did respond mentioned changes such as, discontinuing exams and homework, and no attendance policy.

Every student mentioned that they would recommend the learning community to other students. When asked what they liked about the learning community the most repeated response by the students was their interaction with their peers and, to a lesser degree, with their professors. The students enjoyed the camaraderie with other students,

the small class size, the comfort level of interactions, and the ability to work together during assignments.

Unlike the student responses in Survey I, the student responses in Survey II reflected a basic knowledge of the learning community philosophy. In comparing the responses of Survey I to the responses of Survey II it is evident that the student responses, regardless of the campus, changed from students who had no knowledge of learning communities to students who were discussing student interactions, making friends and going out in the community together. Most of the students who had previously experienced positive learning experiences remained positive after the learning community experience. One student who had responded in Survey I that her previous learning experience had been negative, in Survey II responded that the learning community, “made me feel more negative and frustrated.” However, two of the students who had recorded in Survey I that their previous learning experiences had been negative, in Survey II responded that their attitudes towards school were now positive. For example, one student initially stated in Survey I that her previous learning experience, “had been negative because I’d be so nervous that I had the wrong answer I would never speak out or participate in class.” In Survey II she noted, “Now my attitude toward school is better than ever. I learned that you can have a nice relationship with your teacher and classmates.” In Survey I another student discussed that her previous learning experience “had been overwhelming; it’s kind of hard to keep up with my assignments. They seem to be back to back.” In Survey II, when asked if the learning community had changed her attitude toward school, she noted, “It has given me a positive attitude

toward school. I was afraid to be here in the beginning, but with everyone helping each other I felt more confident.”

The majority of student responses, regardless of the campus, were positive in nature. There are several possible reasons for the positive overtones of Survey II. First, the students that completed Survey II were the students who finished and passed the course. These students would obviously elicit more positive reactions since they were successful in the academic endeavors of the learning community. Also, these students had to return the survey to the reading professor who determined their final grade for the semester. Students could have been motivated to respond positively in order to please the faculty and provide the professors with the positive information they wanted to hear concerning participation in learning communities. On the other hand, the positive responses could have been an accurate measure of what the students truly thought about participation in the learning communities. The students may have actually enjoyed participating in the learning community. It is difficult for the researcher to determine what specifically motivated the students to respond in the manner recorded in the survey data.

#### Student Narrative Data

The final assignment for the students in the linked and clustered learning communities was to write a narrative about their experiences in the learning community. The researcher had initially composed a list of questions for the students to include in their narrative. However, one of the writing professors approached the researcher and asked whether the narrative could be structured more like a letter the students would be

writing to a friend telling them what the semester in the learning community had been like. The researcher agreed that this was a better writing approach that could generate more data so she restructured the narrative assignment to reflect the professor's suggestions. In the letter to their friend, students were to discuss their overall experience in learning communities, what they had learned, how they interacted with other students and teachers, and what changes they would make in the learning community experience (Appendix E).

The narrative topic was distributed to the students in their writing class during the final weeks of the semester. The students had several days to complete the assignment and return the narrative to their writing professor. The professors had decided not to assign a grade to this exercise. On the urban campus, six of the eight remaining students returned the narrative assignment. On the main campus, eight of the nine remaining students returned the narrative. Totally, 14 of the 17 students remaining at the end of the semester returned the narrative assignment. The researcher charted the collected results from the student narratives, urban campus and the student narratives, main campus. This meta-matrix arranged the data according to the student responses for each topic. For purposes of analysis, each student retained the same number previously assigned to the survey data (Appendix M).

#### Student narrative results.

All of the narratives were hand written by the students. Only one student wrote their response on lined paper. All the other students wrote a brief narrative on the original assignment page, below the topic. Two students wrote the narrative as a letter to

a friend, whereas, the majority of students answered the topics to be discussed in short answer form. Some even indented in response to each topic. The students' narratives lacked sophistication and length. In fact, the majority of students wrote only a few sentences and those sentences directly related to the specific topics asked to be included in the narrative assignment. With the brief responses, the researcher was easily able to extract student responses for the topics they were asked to discuss in their narrative.

Most students began with a brief comment concerning their experience in the learning community. For example, students noted, "I thought the learning community was a really good experience. I liked being with all the same people for both my reading and writing class." "I enjoyed the learning community classes I had this semester. I feel as though I received the personal attention I needed. I also felt comfortable in the class because the same students were in both." "I liked being in the learning community because it is a much smaller class and we all work together like one big team. The learning community was very good for me."

"This was my first semester back in school and I am loving it.

I can't believe how long it took me to get into the swing of things.

I think the learning community is a good way of learning and communicating. I especially like the way my school schedule interacts with my work schedule."

Only one student responded in a less enthusiastic manner, "The learning community was an okay experience."

When asked what they had learned in the learning community most students discussed their own academic achievements. For example, students responded that, “In psychology I learned many interesting things about people’s emotions, behaviors and theories. I learned to refine my writing skills.” “I feel that in my writing class I have become a better writer. I really never knew how to write an essay or how to do a portfolio.” “I learned that any kind of essay or paper you write is never perfect. There is always room for improvement.” Only one student mentioned that, “I don’t feel as though I’ve learned that much, or as much as I should be learning this semester.” Not all the students addressed the issue of what they learned. In fact, that particular topic was discussed the least in all the narratives from both campuses. A few students did address the issue of what they learned from the “community” point of view. This is evident by their responses that, “I learned that working with the same people on a just about every day basis gave me the chance to get to know people and to see how other people work with the same topic I’d worked with.” “Well, I think that the class helped me a lot in how I study and how I work with other students.” “I have learned that everybody in a learning community has different weaknesses. I felt I learned a lot.” No students in either community recognized that they were involved in an interdisciplinary approach to learning which is characteristic of learning communities.

Further, the narrative assignment asked students to reflect on their interactions with both students and faculty. The majority of students from both campuses spent most of their narrative addressing this topic. The responses were lengthy and covered both interactions with peers and teachers. It appeared as though the students were interested in

responding to this subject. In relation to their interaction with peers some students noted, “In this community I had the chance to interact with the other students not just in one class but also in the other.” “I was able to study with my fellow students more easily because we spent so much time together and because we helped each other back.” “The class with the same kids was cool because if you missed a class they could tell you the assignments.” Another student responded,

“I also felt comfortable in the class because the same students were in both. We really got to know each other this semester which enabled us to help each other out. For my first semester back after being out of school for five years it was a comfortable environment for me to come into.”

Still another student mentioned, “My reaction towards other students in class was enjoyable. I received the chance to meet new friends and learned great things about them.” Still other students responded positively about their experiences with peers, noting,

“The students were very easy to get along. They respect you as well as you would respect them. If we put our minds and hearts to it we could achieve any goal. Like the time we gave the sandwiches to the homeless people. I really enjoyed that day and wish we could have many, many more days like it.”

Another student felt,

“I have also never interacted with fellow classmates the way I do now.



I think that being with the same group of people every class makes you closer to one another. You build a better relationship with those classmates. You are not afraid to ask questions and also ask for help from each other. You are more of a family than just students in a class together. You learn about each other and that's what makes you close."

One student responded about a negative relationship with their peers in the learning community stating, "I feel that some of us are more intellectual than others." Many students responded positively in regards to the faculty in the learning community. For example, they said that,

"My teachers were wonderful. I never knew you could have a relationship with your teachers as I have with mine. My teachers are very open. That makes you feel as if you can come and talk to them at any time about anything."

"The teachers of the learning community were easy going and were well aware of what the other teachers were doing in their classes."

"The teachers had a chance to talk to each other about the students and ways of teaching." "I think because the classes were small so if you needed one on one with the teachers they were there. I thought the teachers were understanding too. These people don't want to fail you they just want to help you to get to the next level." "She got us all in a discussion some how or another."

“The professors were good teachers for this program because I think they enjoy and believe in education.” However, not all the responses concerning the faculty were as glowing. One student responded that,

“The teachers on the other hand isn’t so great. At first I thought I related to them, but now it just feels like their rushing us, and their just working to get their quota and are not making sure we understand what’s going on.”

When asked to respond about the changes they would make in the learning community this topic generated the fewest responses. Although the greatest response was, “I wouldn’t change anything” and “There aren’t any changes I would change about the learning community, it was an experience I will never forget,” some students did mention several academic changes that they would make in the learning community. For example,

“I would change the fact that in the beginning if your failing one class then you have to withdraw from all the classes. I would also have the teachers teach and give out assignments at a steady pace, not going real slow in the beginning and rushing us at the end.”

“We really didn’t get that much homework, but the thing that most people did not like was that we had to write a journal.” “I would make the changes to make learning a lot more fun and not so serious all the time.” “The only thing that I would change about the learning community is adding more students that are more mentally expanded and not so inhibited.”

### Analysis of the student narratives.

The student narratives were all hand written, brief and contained numerous spelling and grammatical errors. It appeared as if the students, knowing that they would not be graded on this assignment, did not put much effort into preparing an in-depth letter to a friend describing their participation in a learning community. In fact, only two students followed the directions and actually wrote a letter to a friend. The students all began their narrative with a brief overview of their learning community experience. All the responses, regardless of the campus, were positive, expressing varying degrees of enthusiasm with the learning communities' experience. The student overtones particularly reveal that the students enjoyed being with the same students for two classes, favored the personal attention, and liked the small class size and comfort level that resulted from knowing all the students in the learning community. Similar to the survey results, when the students were asked what they had learned in the learning community the majority again discussed their own personal academic achievements such as, becoming a better writer, an improved reader and becoming more knowledgeable in psychology. It was notable, however, that a few students did relate to their learning from a learning community point of view expressing that, "the classes helped me learn how to work with others." No student discussed that they were involved in an interdisciplinary approach to learning which is key to the learning communities movement.

When the students were asked to reflect on their interactions with peers and faculty, the researcher detected "life" in the student responses. All participating students in both learning communities addressed the interaction theme with responses that were

longer than their norm. The student responses appeared to reflect some interest in discussing the topic of interactions, particularly peer interactions. A common response by students was, “My reactions towards other students in class was enjoyable. I received the chance to meet new friends and learned great things about them.” The majority of students were positive when discussing faculty interactions, probably because they knew the faculty might read their narratives. However, some students did not care about faculty reaction and voiced their displeasure with individual professors in the community. These responses were more prevalent on the urban campus. It appeared that some of the negative comments leveled against faculty in the narratives were also expressed verbally to specific professors. This is validated in the faculty narratives. One faculty member noted,

“Along with the comfort level, however, sometimes came the type of verbal banter that could be construed as outspoken or rude. I occasionally felt uncomfortable hearing the students say unkind things about other students or teachers in the community.”

Again, similar to the survey results, the students had little to say about the changes they would make in the learning community. This subject generated very little response. Either the students were afraid to respond because they knew the professors would read and possibly react to their negative comments, or the students really did not care to suggest any changes in the learning community. One viable change that was generated in the narrative, but not mentioned by the students in the survey data was

student dissatisfaction with not being able to drop a course in the cluster without being dropped from the entire learning community.

The student narratives were written and returned to the participating writing professor. Although some students did respond negatively to specifics concerning their learning community experience, the student's overall perception of learning communities was positive. These positive responses could be due to fear of "professor retribution," the need to tell the professors what they want to hear, or possibly true enjoyment in the learning community experience. It is difficult for the researcher to determine what actually motivated the students to respond the way they did in their narratives.

Overall, the student narratives, regardless of the campus, reinforced much of the data generated in the student surveys. The narratives validated and provided depth to the noted themes of overall satisfaction in the learning community, enthusiastic peer interactions, persistence due to personal academic goals, and student disregard to initiate changes to the learning community.

#### Faculty Narrative Data

At the end of the semester the five participating professors were asked to complete a reflective narrative to gain insight on their experience of teaching in a learning community. The faculty was asked to include four questions in their narrative. These questions were derived from the reflective narrative assessment piece written by faculty participating in learning communities at Temple University (Levine & Tompkins, 1999). In the narratives the faculty were asked to discuss:

1. Their original expectations for teaching in the learning community.

2. Their observations and discoveries concerning their students, their colleagues teaching and their own teaching.
3. Issues that need to be addressed.
4. From the learning community experience, what will they take forward in their teaching.

Four of the participating faculty returned the reflective narratives. The responses were all type written by the faculty. The results were charted according to the faculty response to each of the four questions. For purposes of analysis, the faculty members were assigned a number to distinguish their comments (Appendix N).

#### Faculty narrative results.

At the end of the semester four of the five participating learning community faculty wrote narratives about their experiences in the learning community. Three of the four professors had previously taught in a learning community. All four female professors were from the Reading/Writing Department. Three faculty members were full-time and one was an adjunct. Two of the full-time professors had taught at the college for nine years and the other member for six years. The adjunct professor has taught at the college for 15 years. The female professor who did not return the narrative was an adjunct in the Psychology department who had no previous experience in a learning community and who has taught at the college for one year. Three of the four faculty narratives were lengthy, detailed expressions of their commitment to their learning community. One professor briefly remarked to the four questions, numbering each response that the researcher asked the professors to include in their narratives.

When asked to discuss their original expectations of teaching in the learning community three of the professors noted that they had previously taught in learning communities and that their expectations were based on those past experiences. They noted that this particular learning community experience was both similar and unique to their past experiences. “I did learn that in a previous learning community that bonding does not always manifest itself in the same way for each group. This semester’s experience proved that observation to be accurate.” All the professors expected the students and faculty in the learning community to bond with each other and with their peers.

“As a teacher in a learning community I have come to expect several things. I expect a type of bonding to occur between the students and between the teacher and the students. I expect a type of bonding to occur between the teachers as well. And ultimately, I expect these bonds to work in ways, which support learning.”

Another professor noted, “Since I have taught as part of a learning community for many years, my expectation was that this group would become bonded socially within and outside of class.” And still another comment stated, “I expect the learning community to give me more contact with colleagues. I expect the students to work together better and to perform better.” The professor who had never taught previously in learning communities noted,

“I really had few expectations when I began, partly because the assignment

was given to me shortly before the start of the semester. I was told something about the learning community and given a packet of information. I was also told that my teaching style was compatible with the learning community concept and that I would not have to make any alterations in my teaching style or the content of my course.”

In terms of observations and discoveries, the faculty reflected on their students, their colleagues and their own teaching. In regards to their students, both professors on the main campus noted that the students in their learning community had been registered by the learning disabilities counselor who supported learning communities and felt that learning communities worked well for learning disabled students. Consequently, the majority of students enrolled in the learning community on the main campus were learning disabled students. One of their narratives never discussed student bonding, but rather reflected a more frustrated tone in regards to the entire learning community experience. “The students didn’t do so well because we now realize they were being registered into the learning community by the PAC’s department.” Her colleague noted, “The levels of the students were very low, to the point where one had to be asked to withdraw from the class because she was unable to cope with the work.” However, she does reference student bonding in her narrative.

“I found the students evidenced no more closeness than would be expected in any other class. When discussing this with the students at the end of the semester, however, they said that what they liked best about the class was the fact that the students all got to know one another.”



She continued,

“The learning community serves as an anchor for some students who might not otherwise feel affiliated with the college. Many of these students are personally adrift and searching for their role in both college and life. It appears that the learning community creates a sense of unity which can foster commitment to the college experience.”

The professors in the other learning community appeared to have personally witnessed more bonding between their participating students and faculty.

“This semester, our learning community did bond together. I noticed that the students bonded more with other students and teachers after our first ‘social’ experience. One Friday we engaged ourselves, teachers and students, in making sandwiches for the homeless. Perhaps it was the casual atmosphere or perhaps it was the unification which occurred because we were working together on a common goal outside of the academic environment, but somehow I felt that my relationship changed with the students after that experience, and I noticed that their relationships with one another also changed. We became more comfortable and more casual in our interactions with one another.”

Another observation made by a professor was that “my view of the students as individuals with individual personalities, concerns and needs is magnified in a learning community.” The professor noted that,

“Even when students stopped attending, I knew enough about their

backgrounds and attitudes to know precisely why. For example, one student stopped attending when she could no longer continue to travel home from New Jersey following weekends in North Carolina, where she had to serve as executor to her late brother's estate and guardian to his child. I believe, based on conversations with her and on her passing course work, that she, in fact, 'hung on' as long as she could precisely because of the feeling of being part of a group."

The theme of students "holding on" longer in the learning community despite adverse personal problems was reflected in several narratives. One professor stated,

"There were several students who did not complete the semester.

Several students did not complete because of the magnitude of the personal problems that they were facing including pregnancy, financial crisis, and serious health issues. Then, there were a few who may have dropped out simply because they realized that they were not going to pass; I believe these particular students hung in longer than they would have because they were part of the learning community. There was also one young woman in the learning community (with a one-year-old child) who became homeless towards the end of the semester. She continued to come to class and to finish the semester with a 'B' average in my class."

A professor in the other learning community noted,

“I found retention to be a problem since several students did not finish the semester. This may not have as much to do with the learning community but more with the individual students. In fact, the learning community may have indeed aided retention; this is something that can be verified only with a specific study of this question.”

Further, several professors mentioned that the students in the learning community were occasionally inconsiderate to each other. A professor described,

“I have been disheartened to observe this particular group’s behavior toward one another on occasion: the insulting comments, the demeaning jokes, the sniping and bickering. Yet, they continued to work with one another, to socialize, and to help one another for the most part. I even attempted an intervention that formalized rules for classroom behavior, an exercise with which they cooperated but which they later revealed they had felt was unnecessary and patronizing. I wondered how they could treat each other inconsiderately and take each other for granted yet remain committed to the learning community.”

In her analysis of the situation the professor concluded that the student’s behaviors resulted because,

“They functioned very much like an average family: secure enough in their belonging to the unit that they could dispense with the artificial pleasantries we must extend to casual acquaintances.”

The professors in this learning community did not feel that the student behaviors jeopardized the success of the learning community.

“Somehow, however, amidst the complaining, the students were feeling that they were a part of something, a part of something good. They began to perform better on their writing. They began to see me as a friend, a consultant, part of the group, but ultimately they began to hold themselves more responsible for their own mistakes rather than trying to blame an authority figure.”

When reflecting on their relationships in the learning community with colleagues, the majority of the responses were positive.

“The bonding between the teachers in this learning community was invigorating to my teaching. While one teacher was a part time teacher, she was willing to share insights about the students.”

A common response was that the colleague interaction, “stimulated my teaching. I truly enjoyed the facet of the learning community which allowed me to work cooperatively with other teachers and to escape the isolation of the classroom which many teachers experience.” The professors all felt that the learning community experience helped change their teaching practices. “I noticed that my colleague and I both stress interaction, active learning and metacognitive student reflection.” Another professor noted,

“Another benefit of the learning community is that I have gained insight and new practices from my fellow teachers. A colleague who was part of an earlier learning community suggested using a classroom journal, one in

which any of us could write, and I have continued to use that in each of the learning communities of which I have been a part since. As in the past the opportunity to discuss content, methodology, and individual student progress with a colleague has been invaluable. This alone, and the way that it energizes my teaching, is worth the extra time and effort of teaching in a learning community.”

The only negative theme that emerged in their responses concerning colleague interactions was that it was difficult with their busy schedules to find time to meet together to discuss the students and their teaching. “I did interact with my colleague but mostly by e-mail. We went to lunch three times, but even that didn’t feel like enough.” Her colleague noted, “I had hoped we would be able to integrate more of the assignments in the two classes.” A professor in the other learning community noted, “Sometimes, it was difficult to find time with her since she was operating under the demands that most part-time teachers are, running from one institution to another.”

When asked what learning community issues they felt needed attention, the professors again noted the inconsiderate behaviors of their students.

“Along with the comfort level, however, sometimes came the type of verbal banter that could be construed as outspoken or rude. I occasionally felt uncomfortable hearing the students say unkind things about other students or teachers in the community.”

Other concerns were more scheduling related.

“I do have some concerns, though. One problem arose from scheduling

three, one hour and fifteen minute courses back to back. Most days, by the time they arrived in my class, the third, the students were already overwhelmed from the energy and concentration they had needed for the first two. Also, sometimes students attended the first two and then left campus. Another problem resulted from linking the developmental courses to a college-level course for which they were unprepared. For example, the students were unable to satisfactorily complete a research paper for the Psychology course, and they recently confided to me that none of them had read the Psychology textbook.”

A professor in the other learning community noted, “Advisors should be made aware of the requirements for placement in these classes, and these restrictions need to be observed.” The professors viewed administrative concerns as the most bothersome. “The institution might have set times for teacher interaction, a stipend and expectation of some summer work.” Another professor felt that,

“The most critical problem was with administration of the learning community: delay in assigning faculty and notifying them; lack of communication between administration and counseling staff as well as between administration and the Psychology department; delays in financial compensation and reimbursement; and delays in creating a learning community for Fall 2000 into which this group could continue. These matters must be addressed if learning communities are to be successful in the future.”

Still another professor mentioned, “The learning community is a very positive experience and should be promoted as such by the administration.”

As a result of teaching in a learning community, all the professors had suggestions of what they would take forward in their work. One professor mentioned,

“I will always recognize that it is useful to interact with colleagues, to talk about my teaching and students, on a regular basis. I will try to keep from getting stale. I think I will do more modeling next semester. I will try to integrate more assignments, hopefully having time this summer with the other learning community teachers to do that.”

Another professor responded,

“Sometimes a student will have a different attitude or present herself differently in another course with another teacher, and talking about her with that teacher will give me a fresh perspective. Or another teacher might have a different observation about a particular encounter between people in a classroom, some explanation for people’s reaction to one another that I hadn’t considered.”

Further, she noted,

“One of my favorite practices that I implemented as a result of this project was a new approach to reviewing graded exams, which I adapted from the practice of another teacher in this community. I would never have acquired this valuable tool if it weren’t for the learning community experience.”

A professor in the other learning community mentioned,

“I am always reflective about each class and each teaching experience.

I think that the learning community points out the value of cooperative education. I found that my initial experience with the learning community was just that – an initial experience. To fully refine the experience, I would need further opportunities to teach in a learning community. I certainly would like to participate in another learning community; the experience was a very useful and provocative one for me.”

As the final response in her faculty narrative, one professor felt that,

“I believe that learning communities are valuable to our institution, and like people each learning community will have its own personality.

Judging from the students’ response to learning communities this semester, I believe that we should continue to promote this type of learning environment. My reasoning stems from the most frequently asked question that the students posed during our last class – what learning community class can I sign up for next semester.”

#### Analysis of the faculty narratives.

Four of the five participating faculty submitted typed faculty narratives to the researcher at the completion of the semester. Three of the four professors wrote elaborate narratives, even providing the researcher with specific examples to supplement their comments. The other professor responded briefly to the questions that she was asked to include in the narratives. Similar to the student narratives, the faculty spent much of their narrative discussing the interaction or bonding theme. They discussed student/student



interactions, student/faculty interactions but primarily emphasized colleague/colleague interactions. All the professors reflected on how their interactions with peers revitalized their teaching and provided them with new and innovative teaching techniques. The faculty narratives also supported and provided insight into several other themes. The professors noted concerns for the empowerment that the learning community environment provided students. Other themes they emphasized were the persistence of students in their communities despite overwhelming personal and learning problems, and the presence of scheduling and administrative communication issues.

When asked to discuss their expectations of the learning community, three of the four professors who had taught previously in a learning community, noted that their expectations were predetermined from their past experiences. The remaining professor mentioned that she had few expectations when she began partly because “the assignment was given to me shortly before the start of the semester.” All the professors expected for student/student, student/faculty and colleague/colleague bonding to take place in the learning community. “I expect a type of bonding to occur....and ultimately I expect these bonds to work in ways which support learning.”

In their narratives, the professors mentioned observations and discoveries concerning their students, colleagues and their own teaching. When discussing students, the professors on the main campus were quick to point out that the majority of their students were placed into this specific learning community by the learning disabilities advisor, thus creating an academically weak community. The professors appear to be frustrated with both the student’s learning and with their own teaching methods. “I realize

that low level classes need different things – I should have done more circle work and modeling of good writing.” However, the professors did note that even though “the levels of the students were very low,” the learning community “may have indeed aided retention.” The professors in the other learning community noted that their students began to bond with other students and faculty after their first social experience. The faculty felt that they became actively involved in the student’s lives both in and out of class. One professor noted that, “Even when students stopped attending, I knew enough about their backgrounds and attitudes to know precisely why.” The faculty in the urban campus also discussed the overwhelming personal problems faced by many of their students and how the learning community influenced them to persevere and not drop out. The faculty was concerned with the verbal abuse that students directed towards each other and towards professors. Instead of attacking the students, it was interesting to note that the faculty justified the student behaviors comparing them to family life. “They functioned very much like an average family, secure enough in their belonging to the unit that they could dispense with the artificial pleasantries we must extend to casual acquaintances.” The professors did not feel that the student’s behaviors jeopardized the learning community experience.

The faculty narratives were extremely positive when reflecting on colleague interactions. “The bonding between the teachers was invigorating to my teaching.” All the professors felt that their teaching practices had been changed for the better. They mentioned experimentation with the teaching techniques of active learning, collaboration, and metacognitive student reflection.

The majority of faculty concerns focused on scheduling and administrative issues rather than teaching and interaction concerns. They did not like the clustered courses to be held back to back due to student fatigue, and they were concerned about a lack of communication between administrators with both faculty and counselors. Also, the faculty was not reimbursed quickly for out of class activities that they had subsidized. Further, some faculty received a stipend for their participation in the learning community effort whereas others did not.

It appeared that all the professors gained professionally from participation in the learning community. They note that they will, “try to keep from getting stale,” “try to integrate more assignments,” and “try to talk about my students and my teaching on a regular basis.” As one professor stated, “I would like to participate in another learning community; the experience was a very useful and provocative one for me.”

#### Focus Group Data

The final method of data collection used by the researcher was a focus group evaluation. The focus group participants were the students, faculty and administrators involved in the learning community initiative at the community college. There were originally two student, one faculty and one administrative focus groups scheduled. An independent moderator trained in focus group evaluation was secured to facilitate conversation in the groups. The researcher met twice with the moderator to revise the focus group questions, discuss methods of questioning and schedule dates for the focus group sessions. The researcher and moderator decided on a structured, high-ended focus interview format for the group sessions (Creason, 1991). The focus groups were

scheduled on two subsequent days with one focus group before a luncheon and another after the luncheon. Letters were sent to the students, faculty and administrators regarding the dates and times of the scheduled focus groups. (Appendix O) The faculty and administrators responded positively to attending the group sessions. However, the student response was poor. Many of the community college students had jobs, classes and other commitments that prohibited them from attending the focus groups. The researcher and moderator were unable to schedule the student focus groups during class time due to a lack of support by the faculty. Further, the researcher and moderator wanted the two student focus groups to be a combination of students from the two existing learning communities. After a discussion with the moderator and the faculty, the students were informed that they would receive payment for participation in the focus group to cover travel expenses. This incentive provided a larger response by students to attend. However, the increased response still did not warrant two student focus groups. Consequently, the researcher organized one student focus group that followed a luncheon. All the focus groups were held in the faculty Teaching and Learning Center, on the main campus. The Center has an eating area and a conference area conducive for a luncheon and focus group activity. For purposes of analysis, the faculty and students retained their number assignments from the survey and narrative data, and the administrators were referred to by title.

#### Administrator focus group results.

On the day of the administrative and faculty focus groups the moderator arrived early to discuss the process and the order of questioning with the researcher. The six

participating administrators from the community college were familiar with each other so the luncheon was extremely casual. After lunch, the group moved to the conference area to participate in the focus group. The researcher and moderator both addressed the participants describing the purpose of the focus group. The moderator asked questions and the researcher audio tape-recorded and took notes during the one-hour session. To begin, the moderator asked each administrator to identify themselves, their position at the college and their familiarity with learning communities. Of the six administrators, there were two counselors, the PACS Program Coordinator (learning disabled students), the Tutoring Coordinator, the Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences and the Curriculum and Academic Coordinator, Urban Branch. Both of the counselors identified that they were somewhat familiar with learning communities. The PACS Coordinator, Tutoring Coordinator and Curriculum and Academic Coordinator, Urban Branch identified that they were all very familiar with learning communities. In fact, the Curriculum and Academic Coordinator mentioned that he was part of the initial team that went to Temple University to study learning communities. The Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences mentioned that he was “superficially familiar with the concept, but not all the details of learning communities.” After indicating their own knowledge of learning communities, the Dean asked for a clear definition of learning communities. With this established, the group became extremely vocal and made many suggestions and observations concerning the learning communities’ initiative at the community college under study.

The first question that the moderator asked the administrators was for them to discuss how they thought learning communities fit with the mission of the college.

Counselor #1 was the first to respond. She noted that, “learning communities help retention. The students are in the same classes and sometimes the same major. This will help them with a program so they stay in a program.” The PACS Coordinator added, “I think that they develop a sense of a community which creates the desire to continue along and with the extra attention, it encourages retention.” The Dean felt that,

“Learning communities are consistent with the community college philosophy of an open admissions institution which provides various opportunities for all students. Learning communities don’t assure their success but they appear to be one of the most out going means we have to have students supported by their faculty and by their peers.”

The Curriculum Coordinator noted, “The word community is in both titles.” At this point, Counselor #2 asked to have the question repeated. She then continued,

“I think learning communities fit our mission because we want to provide the best possible teaching to our students. Learning communities are very student-oriented which I love. I think in the age of technology we are losing the human touch in the classroom and learning communities brings that back to the classroom.”

The Curriculum Coordinator added,

“ It’s dimensional too. It brings these students together as a community of students and then you are adding a community of teachers that are not isolated from each other. They interact in terms of teaching. This, to a large degree, distinguishes a community

college from a university. In a university there is very little interaction between teachers about their teaching. I think this takes that whole teaching process one step further.”

The moderator then asked the administrators, “What do you see as the strengths and weakness of the learning community initiative?” The Tutoring Coordinator was the first to respond. He noted,

“Like everyone has already mentioned, the strength is that if and when it is successful, the student is successful and they will have a stronger relationship with the college. They are more likely to graduate and go onto a four-year institution or into the job market. The details are difficult. The workload for teaching in a learning community is greater than in a regular course. This is tough to sell to an adjunct faculty member who gets paid the same rate and we ask them to do so much more work.”

Counselor #2 noted that the learning community could help improve a professor’s teaching style and encourage them to grow. Some faculty get into a classroom and give the same lectures year after year and never change. This encourages growth.” Counselor #1 added,

“Another strength is that in our new computer system if someone registers for one of the courses they have to register for the other course. This was a problem in our past where students could register for one class and not the other. With the new Colleague system this

won't happen anymore.”

The Dean questioned whether a problem with learning communities could be that, “Students are frightened away by learning communities because they fear it will be too much of a commitment and having to register for courses at given times and not having the choice to randomly select the times.” Counselor #1 answered that,

“the times of courses are the most important thing. But when we explain about the learning communities and say the times the students say ‘okay.’ It doesn’t seem from my perspective that the times have bothered the students.”

Counselor # 2 felt that, “ the counselors and staff that work registration need to be familiar with learning communities and how to register the students.” She added, “There is a registration meeting, a ‘cheerleading meeting,’ prior to the start of registration. Someone should come and talk about learning communities at that meeting.” Counselor #1 added, “We do have a meeting and this would bolster enthusiasm and knowledge about learning communities.” The Dean asked, “Do we have data to support that learning communities retain students, that would be a strength?” The moderator, who collects and analyzes such data for the institution added,

“I don’t think we have enough and with our old computer system we could not track this, but with the new system we will be able to gather such data and track students. We will need to start marking and tracking these students.”



The moderator then asked the group to discuss learning communities from a student's point of view. The PACS Coordinator responded,

“ In the fall the PACS department is going to have a Reading III/Computer Applications learning community. What I see as a strength from this community is that instead of the students getting caught up in coming to school and just leaving to go to work, the students in the learning community will get a sense of belonging and a sense of being part of the school. In addition, because their social skills are somewhat limited, this opportunity will break the ice for students. In other words, it will create a friendly atmosphere and give the students an opportunity to get to know each other and hopefully from that a better association with the college.”

The Curriculum Coordinator added,

“ The potential is enormous, especially if you look at it from a retention standpoint. The first thing you have to do is to structure a student's education. The more you can define their expectations the more likely they are to stay. The learning community is a structured situation. Secondly, what we shouldn't lose sight of is that the ultimate impact of the learning community is structuring the curriculum. So what we should look for are clusters of courses to present to the students. To a large degree you can then start to examine how courses fit together and put students and faculty together in this highly involved structure and therefore develop a community. It's an interesting experience to develop community. I had an experience once

in Canada where I was put in a group with 25 unknown people for 14 days and was given the objective to build a community. It was a remarkable experience because we had to define rules, and decide what we were going to do. Learning communities can do this for students. One other thing I would like to add is that, you have to keep diversity in your community. By diversity I mean that everyone in course A doesn't have to be in Course B and in Course C. Not all learning communities are 'clean' communities. You can have different people in different classes and it can work well. I found that probably the one word I constantly heard this semester in the urban learning community was the term 'bonding experience.' Just because all the students are put together in the same courses doesn't mean they are going to bond – you have to structure it. The teachers and the students need to structure the learning community and the student interactions, with both in and out of class activities where the students interact, to create the community and get the bonding to happen.”

Counselor #2 responded that,

“The students, like some of us here are just learning what a learning community is. During registration we are not going to have the time to go into great detail about what a learning community is. So, there needs to be a written brochure to give them some basic information so that they can talk with their counselor about it.”

The moderator asked the administrators to discuss what courses they felt should be paired or clustered together and why. The Curriculum Coordinator responded first noting,

“I think the academic skills program should be restructured to include all learning communities because students can have access to college courses while being remediated. Students can succeed in both academic skills and college courses together. That is the most obvious place for learning communities to be used. I know that there is a tendency at the college to say that academic skills are here and college courses are there. You could even organize the learning communities by divisions with the basic skills so that the students can start to explore their curriculum without waiting a year, which is very discouraging, to finish their basic skills courses. But beyond that when you start talking about clustering, you bring your entire curriculum under a microscope to decide what courses fit together so that Instead of this pattern of sequence there is more of a circle.”

Counselor #2 added,

“I could see where your idea could work with a particular curriculum like the Elementary/Secondary Education Program curriculum. Those students are taking a lot of general education courses. You could cluster Cultural Geography, Historical Trends in Education and a psychology course together.

The Curriculum Coordinator added, “The easiest way to begin then, would be to talk about general education clusters.” The Dean added,

“It also depends a lot upon the objectives, because I’m thinking about the natural pairing of courses like taking math and science together in a community. What if your objectives are to look at science from a different perspective? Then you would want to cluster courses that fit your objective. For example, you would want to pair Chemistry in Society with a sociology course if your course objectives are to go in that direction. I think it boils down to the learning philosophy and how that philosophy translates into the learning objectives.”

When asked by the moderator to address what roles administrators should play in learning communities, the group was eager to respond. Counselor #1 felt that, “counselors and advisors should be involved in learning communities because they are the ones who have to sell them to the students.” The PACS Coordinator added,

“I think it is important to start from the top and work down. Obviously this is a good start with the Dean here because much of this may have to come about as a result of the initiative and experience from the Dean. The Deans need to be willing to accept and work with learning communities and then bring that to their people. Because if you don’t get that group of faculty to make this work, it’s not going to happen.”

The Dean responded,

“I agree with her, but there is mounting evidence that the success of

a new initiative has been tied to one person having ownership and oversight into the entire project. I wonder if perhaps, despite the fact that department heads, deans, and counselors all play their role it seems to me that if learning communities become a campus wide initiative, then one person should oversee the project like a director or coordinator.

This would depend on how much of a commitment the college will make to the initiative and how wide spread the communities are. I wouldn't create the position if we had one cluster or one pairing of courses."

The Curriculum Coordinator added,

"I agree. At Temple, learning communities are administered through the office of the Vice President. But, that leads to another thing. The administration has to have a clear idea that it is committed to the concept of learning communities. The objective at Temple was to begin slowly and then get larger. Today, the entire freshman class is involved in learning communities. But, there has to be somebody there who has an objective who is administratively able to see that the communities are going to take place such as, registration and recruitment. To tell you the truth, this is not simple and it is hard work."

The Tutoring Coordinator responded,

"I agree with the PACS Coordinator, I really think the change has to come from the top and I go against your point that you wouldn't appoint someone to be in charge until it goes full-swing. But, it might not go

full-swing until after you have appointed someone to make it happen.

I agree that you need someone from the top to be personally involved in the project and to send the message to the college community that this is really going to happen.”

The Dean added,

“ I’d say it another way, I think it requires institutional commitment.

The support would have to come right from the vice presidential level and come down through the deans, and the chairs. It would have to permeate the entire administrative structure to make it happen.”

The moderator then asked the group whether there should be a separate budget from learning communities or whether the funds should come from the departments. The Curriculum Coordinator jumped in.

“A separate budget with paying the teachers extra for the coordination, and having a small budget for activities. It was interesting, after the students start bonding they start to take over and decide the activities.

The experience with the homeless was something the community decided to do. I don’t think you need to pay the teachers as much as we did, but I think each learning community should have a budget to encourage activities so that the students interact with each other outside the classroom.”

Counselor #2 asked, “Could you use this as an incentive for tenure? If a faculty member participated in a learning community it would be another involvement that would count

in a very positive way for tenure and promotion.” The Curriculum Coordinator and Dean agreed with her. The Curriculum Coordinator continued, “It is very easy financially to figure out if it is working.” Counselor #2 asked, “How.” The Curriculum Coordinator finished,

“Take your retention rates at the present time and match them up against your community and project the number of credits the students were taking and you can figure out by the number you retained how much more money you made for the college. I figured out that if you retain two more students than they normally would have, that more than covers the amount of money you would spend in a learning communities budget, and extra salary.”

Finally, the moderator addressed the group asking them to discuss what changes they would make in the learning community initiative at the college, and the roles they each should play in the initiative. Counselor #2 responded,

“I would like to meet with some of the teachers who have taught in learning communities to hear what they have to say. That would help me determine my role. Right now I don’t know enough about it.”

The Dean added,

“With the absence of one person who is in charge of learning communities, why not have a focus group with all those people involved so they could share their experiences and make recommendations for improvements. I feel hampered by my lack of familiarity and I don’t know what my role as a dean is because

I don't have the direct observation of a learning community that I wish I had. So I would want to hear more directly from the persons who have worked in learning communities."

Counselor #2 commented to the Dean,

"I disagree with you saying you have not had enough experience with learning communities to discuss because it would be wonderful to be free enough to offer things without being locked into ideas."

The Dean defended, "I can't talk about how to improve a learning community without having observed in the areas that need improvement." Counselor #2 added, "But, you should still be willing to learn about it and offer suggestions." The Curriculum Coordinator noted,

"The college community, and the Academic Affairs Office has to make a commitment to the learning communities. The question is, it has to be thought out. And part of that discussion has to be the Deans, and the Deans would have to physically bring some faculty to the table to discuss with the Vice President if there is going to be an overall commitment.

The fact is, you can run very successful learning communities at the college if you have one or two faculty teams in each division that are fully committed to the program. I personally believe that the academic advantages are tremendous. The other thing that I would do, which we just stumbled on at the urban campus, is to have a counselor as part of the faculty team as a point person for registration. This person became an important part of the learning



community team.”

Counselor #1 added,

“No one is going to buy into this unless they are familiar with it. The only way they are going to get familiar with it is to hire someone to observe the technique by sitting in on classes and then to come to the counselor registration meetings to explain learning communities and then to send out memos, and brochures. It is really informing people to see if they are really going to want to buy into learning communities.”

The Dean added,

“This focus group has really been informative to me. Hearing about the Temple experience has helped the Curriculum Coordinator become an advocate for learning communities. This focus group has helped me and I think more people need to hear this.”

Counselor #2 noted, “I think we are lucky that the researcher decided to do this for her dissertation because it has kind of lit a fire under some of us.” The Curriculum Coordinator added, “The faculty are the key. The thing I was impressed with at Temple was that they had someone administratively responsible for learning communities.” The PACS Coordinator stated,

“ I would just like to respond. Initially, I think, it is going to take this focus group to promote interest in what we are doing in order to make the college make a commitment to learning communities. There needs to be more support from within first, in understanding and interacting with

those involved to get the message out to the rest of the college. We need to work on this. The enthusiasm that the Curriculum Coordinator shares I think needs to come from all of us as well.”

Counselor #2 added, “This is really exciting, the growth and creativity gives you a chance to do something different.” At this point the moderator asked if there were any other comments, and with no further responses, the session ended.

#### Analysis of the administration focus group.

The six administrators discussed learning community issues for over an hour. It was evident from the onset of their focus group that they related to learning communities from an administrative perspective. Even though they discussed student and faculty perspectives, they focused on learning community issues through the eyes of an administrator. There were several major themes that surfaced from their dialogue. First, they discussed whether learning communities fit into the mission of this particular community college. Their overall impression of learning communities was extremely positive, despite the acknowledgment by some administrators that they were only moderately familiar with learning communities. One administrator noted that, “the potential for learning communities at this college is enormous from the standpoint of retention.” The administrators mentioned that learning communities provide students with a sense of community or a sense of belonging. Students that commute to college often lack a relationship with the institution. The administrators felt that participation in a learning community would help these students become “a part of the college.” An administrator noted, “Learning communities don’t assure student success but they appear

to be one of the most out going means we have to have students supported by both their faculty and their peers.” This support would encourage students to persist. As one counselor said, “Learning communities put the human touch back into the classroom.” Further, the administrators discussed faculty relationships. They felt that learning communities are not just a community of students but also a community of teachers that interact in their teaching. Several administrators mentioned that faculty participation in learning communities would foster faculty growth and help faculty improve their teaching methodologies.

Another theme that the administrators addressed was the lack of familiarity throughout the entire institution with the learning communities’ concept. Even the participating focus group administrators were not as familiar with learning communities as one would expect. They concluded that the message of learning communities had not been thoroughly communicated to the administrators, faculty and students. They even felt that the counselors and advisors who register students were basically unaware of what constitutes a learning community. Also, with a limited time to discuss courses with students during registration, the counselors felt that the students needed to have knowledge of learning communities prior to registration.

Further, the focus group participants addressed the administration’s role in learning communities. The majority of participants felt that the success of learning communities depends upon an institutional commitment to the project. There is a need for institutional involvement from the top – down. The President, Vice Presidents, Deans and Chairs need to be committed to the learning community initiative if it is to succeed.

The group felt that there is a need for someone to be administratively responsible for the overall learning community initiative and someone, a coordinator or a director, to be responsible for the day to day responsibilities. The group stressed that these positions should have been established initially in order to give structure and organization to the project. As one administrator noted, "You can't wait until learning communities go full-swing to appoint these positions. You need to appoint someone to make it happen." Several participants thought that the Academic Affairs Office should be home to the learning communities' initiative. All the administrators agreed that learning communities would not progress at the institution unless the message was sent from the top-down that learning communities are going to happen.

The entire focus group agreed that a learning community budget needed to be established separate from departmental funding. The budget would fund faculty stipends and student activities. The group emphasized that if only two more students than normal were retained in a course due to participation in a learning community, the initiative would be considered cost effective and the funding would be justified.

Another theme addressed by the administrators was the structuring of the course curriculum for learning communities. One member of the group noted that the academic skills program should be restructured entirely around learning communities. Students would be clustered in both remedial and credit bearing courses so that students would explore the curriculum prior to the completion of all remedial work. Other administrators felt that it would be effective to cluster courses in particular curriculums or to provide general education clusters. All the participants emphasized that learning communities,

although effective in the basic skills curriculum, need to exist in areas other than basic skills. It was also mentioned that courses should be linked or clustered according to learning objectives. All the administrators agreed that the academic divisions need to “bring their entire curriculum under a microscope to decide what courses fit together so that instead of this pattern of sequence there is more of a circle.”

From this informative session, came several administrative solutions to help remedy some of the learning community issues at the college. First, the group felt that in order to determine if the learning community initiative was effective, the college needed to begin to institutionally track the retention rates of the students participating in learning communities. With the institution’s new computer system, it is currently possible to generate this data. Next, in terms of communication problems, the administrators offered numerous suggestions. They felt that in order to familiarize the campus with learning communities there need to be brochures, memos, and flyers created for campus wide distribution. They felt that the selected director or coordinator of the project must attend counselor and registration meeting to discuss the learning community initiative. Another suggestion was that meetings must be held between the Vice President of Academic Affairs and active participants in the learning community initiative to keep the Vice President actively involved in the project. Future focus groups need to be conducted with student, faculty and administrative participation in the same focus group. The students, faculty and administrators who have participated in learning communities need to share their experiences and make recommendations for improvements. Counselors and administrators need to sit in on learning community classes to observe first hand the

learning community experience for a better understanding of how learning communities function. The position of a “point person” in the counseling staff on both campuses is an important part of the learning community team, especially for registration and advising purposes. Finally, the group felt that everyone participating in the current focus group must remain enthusiastic and must take an active role in promoting interest in learning communities across the campus. “There is a need for those already involved to get the word out to the rest of the institution.”

#### Faculty focus group results.

After a brief break, the five faculty members arrived for their focus group, many coming from teaching a class. They had a quick lunch and then sat at the conference area for their session. The researcher discussed the purpose of the focus group and then introduced the moderator. The moderator asked the professors to identify themselves and to state what they taught and how long they have been involved in the learning community initiative at the college. Of the five participating faculty, four were with the Reading/Writing Department and one was with the Psychology Department. Three of the faculty members were full-time professors and two were adjunct professors. Two of the Reading/Writing, full-time faculty participated in their first learning community together during the fall 1996 semester. One of the Reading/Writing full-time professors began working in learning communities in the fall 1999 semester. The two adjunct professors, one from the Reading/Writing department and one from the Psychology department both were currently involved in their first learning community experience. The faculty did not need a definition of learning communities. They were extremely knowledgeable and

could have discussed their communities, their students and their reactions to communities for longer than an hour. In fact, their focus group did go over one hour and the moderator had to draw the session to a close.

The faculty members were first asked by the moderator to think back to their initial involvement with learning communities and to discuss why they became involved. Professor F4 began the discussion by noting that she was the “accident” and was assigned to the learning community three days before the course was to start. She said that, “my indoctrination into learning communities has been quick, interesting and wonderful. I have learned a lot about learning communities since I started.” Professor F2 told of a committee from the college that went to Temple University to observe their learning community initiative. One of the committee members approached Professor F2 and asked if she would be interested in participating in a learning community. Professor F2 and F1 decided to teach a Reading/Writing community together. Professor F1 noted that she was involved in a self-study at the time of the request. The linking of courses provided her with another faculty member to “bounce ideas off and look at her classroom so that it would help triangulate the data.” She also noted as a side remark, “We don’t talk to each other enough. The learning community was a good way to get to know F2 better.” Professor F3 mentioned that, “she too was a victim of fortuitous luck. Professor F1 called me and asked me to teach with her this semester.” She continued, “I think I teach using the same concepts that underlie a learning community so I didn’t have to change my style of teaching.” Professor F5 got involved in learning communities

because, “I thought that being involved in a learning community would be invigorating to my teaching because it would give me the opportunity to share with other teachers.”

The moderator then asked the professors to discuss their perceptions and attitudes about teaching in a learning community, and what they thought a learning community would be. Professor F5 noted that,

“My attitudes were positive. I’m always looking for a new way to encourage students to learn. I thought that a learning community would be an environment where teachers and students shared and bonded and where learning became more pleasant.”

Professor F4 discussed how she had no idea what a learning community would be. She tried to get as much information prior to the start of classes. She had been told that it was an experimental project and that she would teach her normal psychology class and would meet with other faculty to discuss and correlate activities. She noted, “I remember that it all sounded extremely logical.” Professor F 2 remembers that the planning of the learning community with Professor F1 was “a time of great excitement and enthusiasm. We were really excited about the newness of the experience.” She continued that as a faculty member,

“my perception of learning communities today is very similar to when I started. It is a way for faculty to work together in coordination with each other and that is something that is very valuable.”

Professor F1’s initial perception of learning communities was that,

“there would be a retreat for the faculty. They would sit around a



table with other faculty and actually, from scratch, plan out a curriculum together that would be trifolded, for example, Reading/Writing and Psychology. In that way, the learning community would be more integrated.”

The moderator then asked the professors, “Now that you have all had some experience in learning communities, what are your perceptions now, and are they different from what you thought they would be?” Professor F3 started the discussion by relating how she thought her first experience with a learning community, this semester, would have had a more integrated curriculum.

“We didn’t have the opportunity to teach the same things from two different perspectives which would have been helpful.

Professor F1 and I kept in touch by e-mail but we really didn’t have the time to meet and work on curriculum issues.”

Professor F1 agreed that they were “preoccupied by student issues and didn’t integrate the curriculum right this semester.” She mentioned that in previous learning community experiences she did work to create assignments together. She felt that by working again next semester with Professor F3 they would broaden their teaching and, “we now know where we are going with each other.” Professor F2 noted that her initial perception of working and talking with a colleague still held true. She discussed how, “it is important for the faculty in a learning community to have time to meet with each other, so they need to coordinate and build time into their schedules to meet and work on curriculum.”

When she taught with Professor F1,

“we shared an office and saw each other on a daily basis which really helped. We had time to talk about the progress of things all the time. That opportunity to speak with another colleague and learn about your own teaching works the best.”

She was concerned that this semester, with the last minute creation of a clustered community, no thought was put into the faculty schedules and the need for group coordination time. She noted that, “It became an effort to try and catch each other between classes.” Professor F2 continued discussing that,

“one of the most frustrating things with the learning community is that the students who often end up in a learning community are lower skilled within the context of being a basic skills student. With one of the goals being retention, this placement makes that so much harder with these students.”

She attributes the poor grades of students to their low skill levels. Professor F3 added that many of the students in her learning community were learning disabled, PACS students. She noted that the learning disabilities counselor placed the students purposely in the learning community because she knew the professors and also felt that the program would help the students. Professor F1 added that, “this would have been okay if we had known and prepared for a PACS class.” Professor F1 continued discussing her current learning community stating,

“You know how we have been sitting here discussing the need to talk to colleagues. Well, often when you talk to another teacher about a student

they have insights that can help you become a better teacher. For example, Professor 3 was upset that a particular student always wore sunglasses in our classes. I sat with him and learned that he had a severe eye problem that has gone untreated. This young man couldn't look at a piece of paper without getting a headache because of the glare. So he wasn't dissing her, he actually needed medical treatment."

Professor F1 also discussed another problem with a student that was in a previous learning community linked with Professor F2. "Professor F2 was the writing teacher and Professor F1 was the reading teacher. The female student was an extremely disruptive, misunderstood student." At this point, Professor F2 picks up the story and told the group how the student wrote a paper in the writing class about childhood abuse problems with her father. Professor F2 shared this information with Professor F1 who had a conversation with the student that in her words, "turned the student around and she passed the course." Professor F4 began to discuss her changed perceptions with the learning communities' initiative. She was concerned about, "how the administration sees learning communities in the larger picture of the college." She feels that, "the administration needs to take more of a role in the selection of students and faculty, in setting goals and purposes for the learning communities, and in the evaluation of the learning communities." She also feels, "the administration should play a larger role in supporting the faculty in their efforts and in deciding where the students should go after they finish these courses." Professor F1 added that,

"the administrators at many institutions with learning community

initiatives have clear goals for the learning community initiative, such as retention or freshman orientation. They then measure the success of the program in terms of the goal.”

Professor F2 added that, “there has been a lack of communication with the administration regarding learning communities since their inception.” She feels that,

“there is a lack of communication from the administration to the college community itself. The counselors who register students are uninformed of what a learning community is and don’t know how to advise the students.”

She noted that, “there need to be criteria for consideration of placement of students in the learning community.” Professor F3 added that,

“there needs to be more publicity so that the students are aware of what a learning community is. Students wonder why were they selected for learning communities? Was it because they were poor in reading?”

The group agreed that learning communities need to be offered in links and clusters that don’t include basic skills courses to change the image of the initiative. Professor F2 noted that,

“There was a English Composition/Economics learning community offered in the fall 1996 semester but because of a lack of communication between the counseling staff and the people in charge of the courses, and a lack of administrative coordination only four students registered for the linked courses and they were canceled.”

Next, the moderator asked the faculty to discuss their interactions with the teachers they were paired with this semester in the learning community. Professor F 3 began the questioning by stating that she was paired with Professor F1 this semester. She noted that Professor F1 had called her to see if she would pair with her. She agreed because, “I knew her personally and knew we agreed in our teaching methods.” She did add that,

“ On the first day of class, both professors should be present at the same time to meet and address the students. This would help support unity building such as, this is who we are, this is what we expect.”

Professor F1 entered the conversation noting that she had “picked” Professor F3 to work with this semester because, “ I knew she used a lot of metacognitive stuff and small group stuff and I knew we could talk together very easily. I knew she was a good teacher.” Professor F1 added that, “ the question of pairing is very important because you should not be forced to teach with someone. You should get to pick each other.” Professor F4 added that she, “was very lucky to have been paired with two wonderful professors who were constant professionals and wonderful human beings on top of it. In fact, I feel more sorry for them!” With that comment, Professor F2, who was clustered with Professor F4 this semester interrupted and said,

“ Not at all, I got one of the best ideas I ever have been able to use in my class from her. It was the way she reviews after she returns an examination. They take the exam and when it is returned they are given a blank exam and each group compares their answers and comes

up with the best answer.”

Further, Professor F2 noted,

“The issue of pairing has come up this semester because if the people are not given any voice in the decision making of who they work with, it could end up a disaster. You could get paired with someone whos style is so different from yours and there would be no way to conceal that from the students. The students are very perceptive about how the teachers relate to each. By the comments that our students have made this semester they are aware that we are all talking to each other about what we do in class. If our styles were in real conflict with one another it would impede what was going on.”

Professor F4 disagreed, noting

“I disagree with that. I don’t think it matters as much about who they really work with as long as the teachers are committed to a common purpose. Professionals need to just do their job and decide what they mutually want to accomplish.”

Professor F1 questioned whether adjuncts should be used or not in the learning communities. Professor F3, who is an adjunct, added that, “you should set up a core of adjuncts and then you pair them up with someone else and keep branching out.” She addressed the group and said,

“I would like to get back to the issue of pairing. Not every student is a match made in heaven with every teacher. Some students need a

different teaching style and maybe the teachers shouldn't be too much alike. Both need to be committed to the idea of what you are doing. We are all people with good intentions and if we know that we have to communicate and that these are our goals then it's not that important that we teach the same way."

Professor F2 noted,

"I still have a problem with administrators hiring people to work in a learning community at the eleventh hour. What if that person doesn't buy into the learning community idea? Then you have a problem. That is my concern, someone being locked into it because we need a faculty member for the course. A full-time professor can turn it down but an adjunct sometimes can't."

The moderator then asked the professors to discuss how they have altered their teaching methods/styles to fit into a learning community. Professor F4 noted that she did not have to alter her teaching style for the learning community. Professor F5 mentioned, "I have altered assignments and designed new writing assignments so that the theme between the Reading/Writing and Psychology course could be carried throughout." Professor F2 stated that, "she also has not changed her style of teaching. I selected to teach in the learning community because that mode of learning fits the way I teach." Professor F3 noted that she didn't change her teaching style either. "I teach with involvement and that is the learning community style. A lecturer might have problems teaching in the learning community." Professor F1 added,

“The teaching style that seems to get a lot out of learning communities is a student centered, not a teacher centered style. The students interact more and are comfortable with the interaction in a learning community. Students note in their papers that in my small class I talk a lot but in my big class I don’t. So, I think it kind of fits that in a student centered environment the students feel more comfortable and talk more.”

Professor F2 added that,

“I agree that the style has to be student centered. My classes regardless of the learning community are all student centered. I have learned how to make them more student centered by teaching in learning communities. I think teachers that like this style will choose to teach in learning communities because they fit their style.”

The moderator continued by asking the professors what they thought the students got out of learning communities. She asked them to think of something positive and negative. Professor F3 responded that,

“The positive thing is that the students have each other. They do not live on a campus, so this gives them the opportunity to talk to each other and they bond together. The learning community students work together better than other sections. They feel like they belong; they have friends and this helps retention.”

Professor F2 noted that, “the community college student doesn’t get the same bonding experiences as students that live at college.” She feels that,



“the learning community experience provides that bonding experience for the community college student. My learning community is extremely bonded this semester. They were looking out for one another and doing things for each other. One student had her birthday and the group decided to out for dinner to help her celebrate. Another student was not in class and a student in the learning community came up to me and asked for the work so that she could take it to her. They were constantly doing things like that this semester.”

Professor F1 responded that, “out of all my times teaching in a learning community I feel that these students were the least bonded.” Professor F3, who taught with Professor F1, interjected, “but our group really knew each other better than in other classes.”

Professor F1 agreed adding,

“You’re right, they do have a relationship with each other where they share work, discuss exams and work well with other. They are a community of learners but I still don’t think they bonded well socially, even though they worked well together. I am comparing them to my fall learning community which had 30% returning adult female students. That learning community had a character like no other community. They took over the learning community and were empowered. That learning community bonded in such a way that we had a 100% passing rate.”

Professor F2 noted that,

“Bonding is sometimes much more subtle and harder to observe. For example, this semester I had two students that were in my reading section of the learning community who were so different. They were different in age, background, and socioeconomic class. After class these two students had a conversation about the essay and about the commonalties they shared on the subject. This exchange that they were having brought to light to me how these two people were coming together in a way they might not have if it wasn’t for this learning community.”

Professor F3 mentioned that she,

“had other classes, not in a learning community that bond with each other. So bonding is not exclusive to the learning community. However, for those students who would not normally connect to other students, the learning community gives them an opportunity for that comfort level.”

Professor F2 added,

“Not every learning community is the same and they do not all get the same benefit in the same way. Not all learning communities bond the same way, different groups do it different ways. Last semester I kept waiting for my class to bond and finally I realized that they were, just in a more quiet way.”

Professor F1 commented that, “The point is that these students who were initially individual learners and never let anyone else see their writing are now part of student learning as a group of learners.”

The final question that the moderator asked was for the group to discuss the success of different assessment tools such as, surveys, journals and narratives. Both Professors F1 and F2 immediately responded that they liked a classroom journal. Professor F1 noted,

“There is one journal owned by all the students and teachers and they can write in it at any time. It would be passed back and forth from one class to another. You get a lot of insight into student perspectives that you might not normally get.”

Professor F5 agreed,

“I think the community journal is wonderful. I also think that narratives are effective. Surveys are less effective because they don’t reflect in a useful way the complex personal dynamics that make learning communities function well.”

Professor F3 added,

“I think that retention in the class is a big way that you can assess the success of a learning community. For my purposes, reading is more process oriented. So if I can keep a student in the class they will normally pass the class.”

Professor F1 disagreed, “Some of the students have so many external problems. Yes, maybe they hang on longer than they normally would.” She also mentioned,

“I think an individual exit interview with each student – a 20 minute conversation with each student to validate that someone knew their story and their progress is extremely effective.”

At this point, the professors realized the time and that they had been talking for over an hour. Several professors started to leave so the moderator called the session to an end, thanking everyone for their participation.

#### Analysis of the faculty focus group.

The five professors currently involved in learning communities at the community college spoke freely about their experiences and relationships with learning communities. Many of the professors had taught in a learning community with more than one of the people at the table. Since the faculty had all been personally involved in one or more learning communities, their session focused on specific learning community events. There were several themes that dominated their conversation. Foremost, the majority of their conversation centered on personal, peer interactions in their various learning community initiatives. Even when discussing other issues, the conversation frequently reverted back to peer interactions and personal experiences. Further, the professors discussed their overall perception of teaching in a learning community, their teaching styles, the need for more administrative support, student interactions and bonding, problems with the learning community initiative, and changes that need to be made to

maintain the learning community initiative at the community college. Consequently, there were multiple learning community experiences represented in the group.

When asked to discuss their overall perception of learning communities, the group responses referred to learning communities from a teaching and learning perspective. For example, a common thought was,

“I’m always looking for a new way to encourage students to learn.

I thought a learning community would be an environment where teachers and students shared and bonded and where learning became more pleasant.”

No matter what the question concerning learning communities, the professors continuously referred to their relationships with peers. They emphasized the ability to “bounce ideas off each other” and “the ability to work together in coordination with each other which is something very valuable.” “I thought that being involved in a learning community would be invigorating to my teaching because it would give me the opportunity to share with other teachers.” They were also extremely complimentary to each other. It was almost as if the focus group gave them the opportunity to praise each other, something that their busy schedules prohibited them from doing. For instance, a professor responded, “I was very lucky to have been paired with two wonderful professors who were constant professionals and wonderful human beings on top of it.” Another stated, “I got one of the best ideas I ever have been able to use in my class from her.”

The professors were also extremely reflective about their teaching styles. However, it was during this discussion that there were differences in their opinions concerning the commonality of teaching styles. Several professors felt that in a linked or clustered learning community there is a need for the professors to have similar teaching styles. "I knew her personally and we agreed in our teaching methods." Another professor stressed, "Students are aware that we are talking to each other about what we do in class. If our styles were in real conflict with one another it would impede what was going on." However, several other professors disagreed with the need to have similar teaching styles. They felt that different students respond to different teaching styles. If all the professors in the link or cluster have similar styles, this could be detrimental to students. These professors felt that as long as the professors were committed to the idea of what they were doing, teaching styles could vary and the learning community would succeed. "I don't think it matters about who they really work with as long as the teachers are committed to a common purpose." The majority of the professors mentioned that they did not change their teaching styles to fit the learning community. The common theme was, "I selected to teach in the learning community because that mode of learning fits the way I teach." They also agreed that a student-centered and not a teacher-centered teaching environment is probably more conducive for a successful learning community. The entire group did come to a consensus that it is important for faculty to have input into the selection of teaching partners. They did not want administrators to force professors to teach with someone.

The faculty did have some concerns regarding faculty interactions in the learning community. As in their narratives, the professors again felt that finding time to coordinate with the other members of the learning community was a constant problem. The linked community overcame the problem by using e-mail to keep in touch and discuss students and activities. The clustered community found it more difficult to meet due to both their schedules and the number of professors involved in the learning community. Several professors blamed the problem on the administration. "With the last minute creation of a clustered community, no thought was put into the faculty schedules and the need for group coordination time." The professors had other issues with the administration that came out during their conversation. For instance, they felt that the administration hired people to be in a learning community at the "eleventh hour." They did not want to see this happen in the future. Also, they felt that the learning communities' initiative has not functioned from the top-down. They felt that the administration, including counselors and advisors know or care little about learning communities. As one professor emphasized, "The administration needs to take more of a role in the selection of students and faculty, in setting goals and purposes for the learning communities, and in the evaluation of the learning communities." "There has been a lack of communication with the administration since their inception. There is a lack of communication from the administration to the college community itself." Also, the group felt that the administration did not support the professors in their efforts. There has been a lack of funding for the learning community project in terms of stipends and activity fees. While on the theme of learning community problems, the professors

continued to discuss other concerns with the learning community initiative. They felt that there needed to be more publicity concerning learning communities on the campus. They stressed that the students, faculty and administration are unaware of what learning communities actually are. The publicity theme was also expressed by the administrators and by the students in their focus groups. The professors also questioned the placement of learning communities solely in the remedial curriculum. Several professors were extremely frustrated with the placement of so many learning disabled students in the learning community initiative. They mentioned that, "It would have been okay if he had known and prepared for a PACS class." The professors felt that higher level courses must be linked or cluster in order to make learning communities a campus-wide initiative.

Another theme that the professors addressed was their view on student reactions and student relationships in the learning community. The professors felt that the learning community initiative at the community college was positive for students. They mentioned that community college students do not live on a campus and they "do not get the same bonding experiences as students that live at college." The professors all felt that the learning community experience provided the students with "the opportunity to talk to each other." The students "feel like they belong and that they have friends." The professors mentioned that the students looked out for each other and did things for each other. The consensus was that this experience would aid retention at the college. Several professors noted that the learning community students appeared to work better together than students in other sections and exhibited a comfort level in the community. "My learning-community was extremely bonded this semester." Several professors were not



as enthusiastic about the bonding. They felt that the students in their learning community noted no more bonding than students in their other courses. However, in conversation with the students they found out that the students admitted, “our group really knew each other better than in other classes.” The group consensus was that bonding is something more subtle and harder to observe. They concluded that, “not every learning community is the same and that not all learning communities bond the same way, different groups do it in different ways.”

The final issue addressed by the faculty was the success of various assessment tools. The professors mentioned the community journal and narratives as the most effective means of assessing student reactions to learning communities. They felt that surveys were the least effective means of assessment. One professor proposed the use of a 20-minute conversation with each student to “validate their story and their progress.”

Overall, the faculty focus group data reinforced data collected from the faculty narratives. As actual participants in the learning community project, the faculty responses, in both the focus group and the narratives, reveal actual experiences and relationships in the learning community. Their responses support such themes as, positive peer interactions and increased student bonding in the learning communities. They suggested the need for more administrative support for faculty and for the entire initiative, and the need for increased advertising.

#### Student focus group results.

The student focus group was the third group session held. A faculty member from the urban campus assured the researcher at her focus group that five students from

the urban campus were meeting the next day to drive to the focus group. She had overheard them making driving plans. At the time the lunch was to begin, only two students were present, a female and a male, both from the main campus. Another female student from the urban campus, and her talkative boyfriend came during the lunch, and that was it, three student focus group participants. After eating and casually socializing, the focus group began at the conference area. Since the moderator and researcher knew none of the students, the lunch loosened up the students. However, with the move to the conference table and the presence of a tape recorder their mood changed and the students appeared nervous and subdued. The researcher discussed the purpose of the focus group and introduced the moderator who began the questioning. First, the students were asked to identify themselves, mention their major and what semester they were attending. All three participating students were in their second semester at the community college and all three were undecided in their major field of study. The students were extremely brief in their responses and before we knew it, in less than a half an hour, the students had answered all the prepared questions. The moderator and the researcher did ask the students some additional questions that extended the session for fifteen more minutes.

To begin, the students were asked to think back to the beginning of the semester and remember their initial reason for entering the learning community. All three students noted that they had been persuaded to enter the learning community by a counselor. On the main campus, the two students had been directed to register for learning communities by their PACS counselor who advises students with learning disabilities. Student A8 noted, "At first I wasn't sure but I told her I would give it a try." On the urban campus

Student B1 noted, “My advisor saw me in the hall and grabbed me. She told me about the learning community and told me that it would be good for me. I agreed and registered for it.”

The students were then asked to discuss what they initially thought a learning community would be. Student B1 noted that she thought a learning community would be, “the same people wanting to be together in classes.” Student A8 mentioned that he felt, “a learning community would be a chance for students to get to know each other and feel more comfortable in their classes.” And, student A4 felt that a learning community would be useful for, “one on one help.” All three students noted that their view of learning communities had not changed from the beginning of the semester. Unanimously they agreed that it was a good experience and, “I would do it again.” Student A8 stated that, “We all really got to know each other and felt more comfortable in the classes.” Student B1 noted that, “It was a lot of fun.”

When asked to compare what they thought about learning communities on the first day of class to how they feel now, all three students answered the question in relation to their professors. Student B1 noted,

“I thought it was going to be hard. My papers in my writing class weren’t good. But now, the relationship between the professor and me is better. I think of her as a regular person now. I can joke with her and I feel comfortable.”

Student A8 agreed, mentioning “It makes you feel comfortable when your professor is like you – a regular person that treats you like a person. I could even kid around with them.”

The moderator followed with an additional question about the professors. She asked whether the students thought any teacher could teach in a learning community. Student B1 mentioned that she felt that a teacher in a learning community needed to have a nice personality and be open. She said her teachers were “okay.” Student A8 started talking about his two professors noting that they were both nice and were fun to joke around with. Student A4 listened to the other responses and just agreed, making no additional comments.

When the moderator asked what they had observed as the similarities and differences between the learning community and their other courses, student A4 was the first to respond. She noted, “The teachers care more than in other classes and make sure we understand and put forth an effort. The regular classes don’t care as much.” The moderator then asked the students what other courses they thought should be linked into a learning community. Student A 4 felt that math should be linked into the reading and writing because she has difficulties with math and a learning community could have helped her. Student A8 responded that, “My professor told us that next semester they are going to link a history course with the reading and writing. I think that would be neat.” Student B1 mentioned that on the urban campus her learning community had been promised another community linking Composition I and Sociology. She is interested in registering for that learning community.

When asked what the community college should do with learning communities in the future, all three students responded that the college should, “keep them and offer them to other people.” Student A4 noted that the learning community helped her to learn better in the smaller class and that learning communities should be offered to others. Student B1 questioned the name “learning community” and felt that the name should be changed. She told the others that on the first day of class her learning community thought that they were the “retarded community.” She said that her class did not know what a learning community was and thought only dumb people were put in them.

The students were asked whether they talked to their friends about the learning community. Student A4 said that she did not. Student A8 mentioned that, “all of my friends on campus that I know are in the learning community. I don’t see anyone else.” Student B1 did note that she had discussed the learning community with her friends. She looked at her boyfriend sitting next to her and said, “I’ve told him about it. He went here before and he says no one ever gave him pizza.”

The moderator then asked the students what the college should do to promote learning communities for other students. Student B1 again noted that a learning community sounds like a kindergarten class. She mentioned that, “They need to promote it differently. I don’t like the flyers. They make it look like a class for babies.” Student A8 did not agree with student B1 since he had not seen any flyers on the main campus. He liked the idea of promoting learning communities through counselors because, “That was how I was told of them.” Student B1 disagreed stating that, “All of my class learned about learning communities through a counselor too but they kept asking, why me, why

did the counselor pick me for the learning community?” She suggested that the counselors go into existing classes to discuss the concept of learning communities instead of singling out students.

The moderator then asked the students some extra questions since all the planned questions had been answered in only a half an hour. She questioned them on their retention in the course and what kept them from dropping out this semester. Student B1 immediately responded that she would never have dropped out because she was paying for her courses. However, she did note that participation in the learning community helped, “take some of the stress out of my life.” She enjoyed going out for dinner and taking sandwiches to the homeless with the learning community. Student A8 commented that the learning community experience helped him do better in school because the students, “gave each other input and we took notes together and shared information that we learned.” Student A4 stated that if she had not been in a learning community she definitely would have dropped out of school.

When asked if the learning community helped them make friends at the college, Student A8 again noted that the only college friends he had were from the learning community. Student A4 noted that she knew other people but they were mostly from high school. “I know more new people in the learning community than in any of my other classes. In my other classes I haven’t met anyone to talk to.” Student B1 felt that making friends at college relates more to personality rather than to participation in a learning community. However, she stated, “the learning community would help quiet

people make friends because you work in groups. You also get to know people better.”

Student A8 added that, “you learn better when you work in groups.”

Finally, the moderator opened up the discussion by asking the students to talk about some of their experiences in the learning community this semester. Without structured questions the students became a bit more talkative as they told stories of the fun things they participated in during the semester. Student B1 spoke the most. She told the other two students about how her learning community took sandwiches to a homeless shelter. She also told them of a pizza party with a movie and a trip to a restaurant for dinner. The other two students were quite jealous to hear of such fun. Their professors had not actively pursued out of class adventures. They had bought the students dictionaries, but at the time of the focus group the students had not yet received them. This added to the envy. Student B1, enjoying the reactions from the other students, continued to explain how her reading professor brought in Ben and Jerry’s ice cream when they read a story about the two inventors. She noted, “Food is helpful because the teachers don’t seem as strict and they can get to know you better when there is food.” Finally, Student A8 responded that his teacher brought in Oreo cookies one day. Student B1 ended the session by stating that, “In learning communities students can do things that other professors don’t let students do. One of our teachers let a student bring their kid to class. No other class would permit that.” The session ended and the students, grabbing some extra food, left quickly with no additional comments regarding learning communities.

### Analysis of the student focus group.

After offering a financial incentive and extra credit points, the student focus group still only generated three participants. There are several possible reasons for this. First, the community college student is a part-time student who generally works a part or full time job. These students routinely attend several classes in a row and then leave the campus. Very few students eat, socialize or “hang out” on campus after class. Thus, asking students to attend a focus group on a day without class could have been an issue for many students in the learning communities. Also, the majority of students in the learning community never heard of a focus group. The process was possibly intimidating, even with a financial incentive. Also, the students had no relationship with the researcher. If the researcher had been their reading or writing professor, the number of students attending the focus group would have possibly been larger. The students would have felt some commitment to attend. Finally, the researcher was unaware of how the focus groups were promoted to the students by the learning community faculty. A professor’s casual demeanor could have signaled to a student that the focus group process was unimportant.

Even though there were only three student focus group participants, the combination of the two learning communities stimulated the dialogue. Students from one learning community elaborated on their learning community and vice versa. If all the participants were from the same learning community, the researcher questions whether the student interaction would have generated such comparative dialogue.



Further, the data from the focus group session helped validate information collected on the surveys and the narratives. For example, when asked to think back to the beginning of the semester and remember their initial reason for entering the learning community, all three students noted that they had been persuaded to enter the learning community by their counselor. In both, student survey I and in the student narratives, when asked to discuss why they selected the learning community, the unanimous student response was also that their counselor had directed them to the learning community. Other focus group themes were aligned with themes discussed in the survey and narrative data. For instance, all three students enjoyed discussing their interactions with both faculty and other students. The student from the urban campus delighted in telling the other students of a pizza party, a trip to a homeless shelter, and a dinner outing. They all noted that the majority of their friends at the college were from the learning community. “I know more new people in the learning community than in any of my other classes.” All three students discussed the comfort level with both students and faculty in their learning community. When mentioning faculty interactions, one student noted that she had had some difficulty with a professor but that things became easier as the semester progressed. They all mentioned that their teachers, “were like regular people and you could joke around with them.” It was interesting to hear their uniform reaction that the teachers in the learning community “care more” about students than faculty in other courses. Many of the comments related to student and faculty bonding and interaction. The comments supported and provided depth to data collected from the student narratives and surveys.

When asked if they would participate in a learning community again, the students answered with a unanimous “yes.” The three students even suggested what courses should be linked, such as, English Composition/ Sociology, Reading/Writing/History, and possibly Math with the Reading/Writing. The majority of students in survey II and the narratives noted that they too would enjoy participation in future learning communities. Two of the focus group students responded that participation in the learning community was a determining factor for remaining in the courses. One student stated that she would have definitely dropped out if it had not been for the learning community.

The students were not in agreement with the subject of how to promote learning communities. Two of the students thought the traditional method of using counselors and flyers was appropriate. However, one student reacted negatively to such practices. She felt that the practice of singling out students to recruit them into the learning community made the program appear suspicious. The students in her class had interpreted the counselor’s actions as negative and concluded that they must be viewed as “retarded” if they were individually asked to participate in a learning community. This response did not surface in any other data but helps support the implementation strategy that learning communities should not be solely practiced by remedial programs. It is important to have learning communities across the college curriculum so that learning communities are viewed as a campus-wide initiative.

It was evident by their enthusiasm and their responses that the students enjoyed the social aspects of the learning community. They enjoyed the out of class activities, the

food, and the more casual atmosphere in their courses. Both the student and faculty narratives discussed the bonding effect of the out of class activities. The participants also favored “group discovery” as opposed to “self discovery.” This is evident in their comments that, “You learn better when you work in groups. You also get to know people better.”

Overall, the student focus group data reinforced in greater depth much of the data collected from the student surveys and narratives. In fact, referring back to the individual surveys and narratives of the three student focus group participants, the researcher found the student responses to be consistent across all three measures. For example, the student that was inconsistent in her responses during the focus group followed the same pattern in her surveys and narratives. In her narrative data she noted that the learning community had been a great experience. Then, in the same measure she spoke negatively about professors. The other two students generated more consistent, positive comments throughout their surveys, narratives and focus group responses. The student focus group responses supported the themes of overall satisfaction in the learning community, willingness to participate in another learning community, and enthusiastic peer interactions, especially the social aspect of the learning community. The students also favored the small class size, group collaboration, and the overall comfort level of the learning community environment. However, the student from the urban campus was concerned about the counselor’s recruiting methods.

### Analysis of the Implementation Conditions

The literature refers to several implementation conditions that need to be established in order to insure a successful learning community initiative (Elliott & Decker, 1999; Gabelneck, et al, 1990; Gardner & Levine, 1999; Jundt, et al, 1999; Levine & Tompkins, 1996; Schroeder, et al, 1999). The implementation conditions are: ownership of a learning community, selection of a model, selection of the faculty, recruitment of the students, development of partnerships between academic and student affairs, funding and ongoing assessment. The researcher compared the results from data collected by the student surveys, student and faculty narratives and student, faculty and administrative focus groups to the implementation conditions necessary for successful learning communities in order to determine how well the current learning community initiative met these stated conditions.

#### Implementation: Ownership.

The literature mentions that to successfully implement a learning community, the faculty and the administration must share ownership of the learning community initiative (Elliott & Decker, 1999). The planners need to connect the learning community initiative with the mission of the institution and other campus concerns, such as retention or general education (Gardner & Levine, 1999). The learning community must find stable leadership and an administrative home in the institution. The literature suggests that an administrator should coordinate the project and that meetings between participating faculty and administrators should be ongoing (Elliott & Decker, 1999; Gabelnick, et al, 1990). "Ideally, the coordinator works with an advising committee that represents the

stakeholders, including students who have an investment in learning communities” (Gardner & Levine, 1999, p.112).

After analyzing the data, the researcher found that one of the major weaknesses of the learning communities under study was in the area of ownership. The administrators at the community college discussed in their focus group their lack of complete understanding of the learning community concept. Both the faculty and the administrators mentioned in their focus groups that the learning community initiative should work from the top-down. The administrators and faculty felt that there was a need for institutional involvement and commitment in order for the learning communities to succeed. However, from the comments of faculty and administrators it is obvious that this has not happened at the community college. No administrator has taken ownership of the learning community project at the institution, and the college has not committed to the initiative. Several faculty and counselors have pursued the learning community efforts with very little support from the administration. In both the faculty narratives and the administrative and faculty focus groups, there was consistent reference to a lack of commitment and communication in terms of the learning community initiative. The faculty and administrators mentioned that even the counselors and administrators that are involved in the project do not integrate their efforts. There is minimal communication between the participating faculty and counselors and even less communication between higher level administrators, faculty, counselors and students.

### Implementation: Selecting a model.

Another factor that leads to successful implementation of learning communities is the selection of the appropriate model that fits the institution's goals and mission (Gardner & Levine, 1999). It is also important to fit the model to courses that satisfy requirements and are popular such as, general education courses (Gabelnick, et al, 1990). Further, Gardner and Levine (1999) suggest that institutions start small and gradually expand their learning community programs.

Qualitative data from the current study reveal that the community college had started small with their initiative. They selected the linked and clustered models, which appear to be appropriate for an institution in the initial stages of learning communities. However, the institution has not been able to expand or increase the number of learning communities. This appears, from analysis of the data, to be due to course scheduling issues. The learning communities effort at the institution under study does not center on popular courses or courses that meet requirements. In fact, the initiative has primarily focused on links and cluster with remedial courses. Even the students in their narratives and focus groups note that they felt "retarded" in the learning community because of the stigma attached to the initiative. The faculty, in their focus group, was concerned about the large number of PACS students enrolled in the learning communities. Both the faculty and administrators suggested in their focus groups that learning communities should be offered in credit bearing course links or clusters to eliminate the remedial stigma.

Implementation: Selecting the faculty.

Another condition that effects the implementation of successful learning communities is the selection of the appropriate faculty. The faculty must be open to new methods of teaching and need to come together with colleagues to discuss and adapt their curriculum to the learning community (Levine & Tompkins, 1996). The faculty must come together with students, administrators and other faculty to discuss their experiences (Gardner & Levine, 1999). In order to implement successful learning communities, there is the need for ongoing faculty development opportunities (Levine, et al, 1999). Adjunct faculty should also be encouraged to participate in learning communities (Gabelnick, et al, 1990).

An analysis of the data indicates that the faculty, currently teaching in the learning community initiative, are flexible in their teaching methods. In their narratives and in their focus group they enthusiastically reveal a zest for working and sharing with other faculty, learning new teaching ideas, and teaching in a student-centered environment. They get excited when students bond and persist despite incredible odds. However, the faculty felt that they are not properly supported by the administration. There are no faculty development activities and no meetings with administrators to discuss successes and concerns with the learning community program. Also, several faculty received stipends for their efforts and others did not, causing low moral among the faculty. The faculty in their focus group, did address participation by adjuncts in learning communities. The faculty encouraged the use of adjuncts to participate and then

share their experiences with other adjunct faculty, thus increasing their involvement. However, the two adjuncts participating in the current initiative were placed in the learning communities in the “eleventh hour.” According to the faculty, these last minute assignments, with no additional funding discouraged adjunct participation. Also, the full-time faculty noted in their narratives that adjuncts that teach at other institutions have less time to devote to attending meetings to discuss curriculum and student issues.

#### Implementation: Recruiting students.

Most important to the successful implementation of learning communities is the need for rigorous recruitment of students to the program. Institutions need to advertise with brochures, flyers, and booklets, and with articles in the campus paper and catalog (Gabelnick, et al, 1990). Current and former students should be used for recruiting new students. They should talk to new students at orientation sessions and encourage others to participate in leaning communities (Levine, et al, 1999). Again, learning communities need to be organized around interesting, popular and credit-bearing courses so that the students will be drawn into participation in a learning community (Jundt, et al, 1999). The literature reveals that one concern for learning communities is the power of the students. Students in learning communities spend large amounts of time together, thus becoming extremely friendly and comfortable with each other. This can have both positive and negative results (Levine & Tompkins, 1996).

Results from the focus groups, narratives and surveys indicate that the recruitment of students has not been successful at the community college under study. Although the majority of students that participated in a learning community noted that they have been



satisfied with the program, several students mentioned in their narratives and focus group that the recruitment methods were unsatisfactory. Students felt that the counselors did not adequately explain the learning community program, and did not explain why students were selected to participate. The students felt that flyers appeared to promote a “special education” mentality. Other students noted that they never saw a brochure, flyer or poster about learning communities. Faculty and administrators in their focus groups echoed the response of the students. They felt that learning community advertising was lacking. Further, counselors complained in their focus group that they do not have the time to explain learning communities to each student. According to the implementation condition, the community college initiative needs to use students that have participated in learning communities to promote them to other students, possibly during orientation sessions. From the data studied, it is obvious that this practice has never been used to promote the current learning communities’ initiative to students at the institution. Further, the faculty mentioned, in both their narratives and in their focus group, the presence of student power in the learning community. They noted the positive bonding experiences and the comfort level of the students. They also mentioned their concern for the familiarity that students have with each other as a result of participation in the learning community. The faculty felt that the students were occasionally rude to both professors and other students. According to the faculty, students spoke to individuals in a manner not conducive to a college classroom. Several faculty members, although concerned, concluded that the student behaviors exhibited a comfort level that was the equivalent to family conversations.

Implementation: Partnerships between academic and student affairs.

There is a need for developing partnerships between academic affairs and student affairs personnel if learning communities are to be successful. The literature notes (Schroeder, et al, 1999) that at our colleges today there exists a fragmentation of organizational responsibilities rather than a sense of community. The assumption is that course work is the concern of the faculty and that out of class learning is the role of the student affairs personnel. However, in order to design successful learning communities there needs to be joint planning between academic and student affairs personnel (Schroeder, et al, 1999). It is also important for advisors and registration staff to be educated about learning communities since the majority of students enrolled in learning communities are registered and advised by counselors (Gabelnick, et al, 1990; Levine & Tompkins, 1996). The counseling staff should be invited to attend program and planning meeting to get a feel for the learning community initiative. They should make recommendations and contributions to insure the successful implementation of learning communities (Bennett, 1999).

An analysis of the qualitative data reveals that the student affairs personnel have never been consulted concerning the learning communities' initiative at the community college. The student affairs office was never mentioned in any of the data. The faculty appears to have organized and arranged any out of class activities without consulting student affairs. Neither the administrators nor the faculty even suggested this link in personnel. The counselors, however, have played a role in the learning communities' initiative. Both the faculty and administrators noted that the counselors' knowledge of

learning communities is minimal and that they need to become more involved in the initiative due to their major role in registering students. The administrators, in their focus group, suggested that the counselors attend learning community courses to observe the learning community first hand.

#### Implementation: Funding.

According to the literature, successful implementation of learning communities requires adequate funding. Again, having administrative support is crucial to obtain institutional funding. Many institutions have secured funds from external grants. Funds are needed to run faculty development sessions, and to pay for faculty stipends and student activities (Gabelnick, et al, 1990).

Results from the faculty narratives, and the faculty and administration focus groups reveal that funding is a concern at the institution under study. According to the data, there was no mention of any initiative to secure grant funding. The faculty on the urban campus received a stipend for their participation in the learning community whereas the faculty on the main campus received no stipend. This resulted due to the actions of the Academic and Curriculum Coordinator on the urban campus who secured funds for his campus initiative. However, the faculty noted in their narratives and focus group that the distribution of money should be equal for all faculty participants. The faculty in both learning communities did mention that they had a minimal budget for activities. They expressed concern about reimbursement delays for out of pocket expenses.

Implementation: Ongoing assessment.

Ongoing assessment is crucial to the successful implementation of a learning community (Gardner & Levine, 1999). Gardner and Levine (1999) note that a researcher in the institution, not involved in the learning community initiative, perform the assessment using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. They stated that a variety of techniques should be used including, surveys, focus groups, interviews, participant observation and reflective narratives.

Prior to the current study, the learning community initiative at the institution used student surveys, both at the beginning and end of the semester, to assess student reaction to participation in the learning community. The students were also asked to fill out a mid-semester questionnaire. According to the qualitative data results, the participating faculty and administrators were not asked to participate in any learning community assessment. Also, no quantitative data had ever been collected at the community college. In their focus group, the administrators discussed the need to collect student retention data.

In summary, surveys, narratives and focus groups were used as assessment tools to collect data from students, faculty and administrators concerning their participation in a learning community in order to determine what they viewed as the positives and negatives of the initiative.

Student data revealed that when initially surveyed, the students were unsure of what constituted a learning community. Their second survey provided more insights into their view of participation in a learning community. The students emphasized that they

enjoyed attending classes with the same students, and favored the personal attention, small class size and the comfort level that learning communities offered. The student narratives validated and provided more depth to the same themes the students mentioned in the survey data. Even though only three students showed up for the focus group session, the data acquired from the students that participated in the focus group triangulated the data from the surveys and the narratives. The student responses reinforced the themes of enthusiastic peer interactions, the classroom comfort level, the caring attitudes of faculty and the overall satisfaction with participation in a learning community. In addition, the students indicated their enthusiasm for collaborative assignments, student centered learning and social activities.

The faculty provided the researcher with a wealth of personal learning community experiences both in their narratives and in their focus group. The faculty addressed the themes of faculty interactions, their teaching styles, student bonding, increased advertising needs, and problems with the administration. The faculty focus group validated and provided depth to the information obtained from the narratives.

The administration participated in one assessment tool, a focus group. They addressed the issues of institutional commitment to learning communities and the need for administrative responsibility. They offered numerous suggestions for the improvement of the current learning communities initiative such as, tracking retention rates, providing more advertising, holding workshops for faculty, counselors and administrators, and making learning communities a campus-wide initiative and not just remedial.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion of Findings

#### Introduction

The formation of learning communities is a current initiative at many colleges and universities that links or clusters courses from several distinct areas of study. Learning communities organize students and faculty into smaller groups, encourage integration of the curriculum, and help students establish academic and social support networks. They also bring faculty together in more meaningful ways and help focus both faculty and students on learning outcomes (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). The learning community philosophy is different at every institution due to the individual and unique needs, purposes and goals of that institution. The current literature (Gabelnick, et al, 1990; Gardner & Levine, 1999; Levine, 1998; Shapiro & Levine, 1999, Tinto & Goodsell, 1993) primarily examines institutions that are innovators in the learning community movement and where the college mission supports the learning community concept.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine, through surveys, narratives and focus groups, the attitudes and perceptions of students, faculty and administrators that were involved in a learning community initiative at a community college, in order to determine what they viewed as the strengths and weaknesses of their experiences. The researcher compared the data collected from community college students, faculty and administrators with the implementation conditions necessary for successful learning communities. The compiled data provided information that could be used to suggest changes to the learning community initiative in order to increase

institutional support, and student, faculty and administrative participation in the learning community program.

### Summary of the Research Study

The qualitative case study examined a linked, Reading III and Writing III learning community on the main campus, and a clustered, Reading III, Writing III, Basic Psychology learning community on the urban campus. The study participants were the students, faculty and administrators involved with the two learning communities initiatives at the community college during the spring 2000 semester. The faculty of the linked and clustered courses taught individually, but coordinated assignments. The researcher used surveys, narratives and focus groups as the methods for data collection. Standard demographic information collected for each student was examined for purposes of determining whether the student population of the learning community was typical or atypical of the traditional college classroom.

The students in the learning community were surveyed both at the beginning and the end of the semester. An open-ended, short answer questionnaire format asked students to respond about their previous learning experiences, and their reactions to participation in a learning community. The researcher charted the collected results of Survey I and II according to student responses for each question. The students also wrote an end of the semester narrative developed by a participating writing faculty member who suggested that the narrative be a letter addressed to a friend discussing the student's participation in the learning community. The students were asked to discuss in their narrative their overall experience in the learning community, what they had learned, how

they interacted with peers and professors, and what changes they would make to the learning community. The researcher charted the collected data according to the student responses for each topic.

The professors participating in the learning community wrote an end of the semester narrative with questions taken from the faculty narrative required by learning community faculty at Temple University. The incorporation of a faculty narrative with the student responses provided a complete portfolio of the learning community experience. By examining this compiled set of narratives both individually and collectively, the researcher assessed student and faculty reaction to participation in the learning community and found patterns and themes in the responses.

To help validate the qualitative data collected from the surveys and narratives, the researcher conducted several focus group discussions with students, faculty and administrators. Focus groups are well-planned group discussions conducted by a moderator. Their goal is to examine perceptions, attitudes, feelings and ideas from participants rather than to problem solve (Cohen & Engleberg, 1989; Palomba & Banta, 1999). All three focus groups consisted of three to seven participants. A structured, high-ended question format was used to provide structure and consistency to each of the discussion groups (Creason, 1991). The questions used in the focus groups were driven from the review of the literature and the research questions. The focus groups were audio tape-recorded and the researcher took notes during each session. The data was recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The major themes that were identified in the data were then compared to the conditions needed for successful implementation of an



ideal learning community in order to determine the successfulness of the learning community initiative under study.

### Student Conclusions

There were 30 typical, first or second semester college students from different age and ethnic groups enrolled in the two learning communities at the community college. The students from the two learning communities completed two surveys, one at the beginning and one at the end of the semester. They also wrote a narrative about their experiences in the learning community. Three students from the two learning communities participated in a student focus group. Consequently, from filling out two surveys, writing a narrative and participating in a focus group, the students provided the researcher with the greatest amount of data. This data was both consistent and inconsistent with the literature.

First, it was obvious that when surveyed at the beginning of the semester very few of the students understood the concept of a learning community. They all basically relied on a counselor's advice for course placement. The students were only interested in their own academic needs such as, passing the course and getting a good grade. The student's initial reactions to participation in a learning community were noteworthy since much of the literature from institutions successfully implementing learning communities (Avens & Zelley, 1992; Isbell, et al, 1996; Tinto & Love, 1995; Tinto, et al, 1996) failed to include data discussing a student's initial exposure to a learning community. The majority of qualitative data from these institutions discussed only the final reflections of students participating in a learning community.

The researcher observed in later data collection that the students became more conscious of their role in the learning community as the semester progressed. Although the overtone of their responses continued to emphasize their concern for their personal college success, the students began to examine and think about the learning strategies used in their learning community. Their later responses were both more opinionated and mature as they gained knowledge about the learning communities' philosophy. For example, the students noted that the learning community had a positive influence on their attitude towards school and that they would recommend it to other students. They also enjoyed getting to know peers and teachers on a more intimate level. The student responses emphasized that they enjoyed attending classes with the same students, and favored the personal attention, small class size and the comfort level that learning communities offered. The students spent the majority of their responses enthusiastically discussing peer interactions that are synonymous with learning communities. They mentioned the friendships and academic interactions with other students. The student responses indicated student enthusiasm for collaborative assignments, student centered learning, and social activities. The researcher found these reactions to be more congruous with the student reactions reported in the literature (Avens & Zelley, 1992; Isbell, et al, 1996; Tinto & Love, 1995; Tinto, et al, 1996).

Although the overtones of the surveys and narratives were positive, some students did voice their displeasure with individual professors and students in the learning community. These reactions were more prevalent on the urban campus. It appeared that the learning community had created a comfort level where some students were not

inhibited from voicing their dissatisfactions with faculty and other students. All in all, the complaints lodged by students were minor, individual complaints that are common of all college courses and are not exclusive to learning communities. Levine & Tompkins (1996) were one of the only sources in the literature that discussed the “student power” theme which states that, students that spend more time together are provided with more opportunity to voice concerns about a particular course or teacher. It was surprising that other institutions in the literature, immersed in learning communities, failed to report this occurrence in their studies. In fact, most of the qualitative literature that discussed student reactions in a learning community reported only positive student responses (Avens & Zelley, 1992; Isbell et al, 1996; Tinto & Love, 1995; Tinto et al, 1996).

The researcher continuously questioned the motivation behind the student survey, narrative and focus group responses. Even though the participating professors did not grade the narratives, ask for names on the surveys, or participate in the student focus group, the researcher felt that the majority of student responses were carefully written with a faculty audience or authoritarian figure in mind. The positive student responses were suspected by the researcher to be the result of the students trying to please their professors. The limited negative responses appear to have been voiced by individual students with the specific purpose of letting the professors know about their dissatisfaction with their courses. It was difficult for the researcher to determine what actually motivated the specific student responses.

### Faculty Conclusions

The five professors participating in the learning communities program were asked to write a reflective narrative of their experiences and to participate in a focus group. Of the three interest groups, the faculty provided the most in-depth data concerning the daily “nuts and bolts” operation of a learning community. They wrote and spoke freely about learning communities from a teaching and learning perspective. Three of the five professors had previously taught in a learning community. Thus, the faculty responses in both the narratives and the focus group provided the researcher with a wealth of personal experiences. For example, in both the narratives and focus group they discussed extensively the interaction or bonding theme. They mentioned student/student interactions, student/faculty interactions and colleague/colleague interactions.

When discussing the student-bonding theme, the professors emphasized that the students appeared to bond because of in-class group work, and out of class social activities. They felt that students “held on” longer in the learning community despite personal problems. They noted that the students in a learning community “have each other,” “feel more comfortable and talk more,” and “work together better than in other sections.” These findings definitely supported what the experts in the literature have reported (Lin, et al, 1995; Love, 1999; Matthews, 1994; Strommer, 1999).

However, one professor from the main campus felt that her students did not bond as well as the students in her fall learning community. The faculty conversation focused on how bonding can be subtle and hard to observe. Although the learning community does provide an opportunity for students to bond who would not normally connect with

other students, bonding does not have to be exclusive to learning communities. Bonding can be observed in courses other than learning communities. These observations refute the literature that stated that student bonding differentiates a learning community environment from other learning environments, and that the bonding is extremely blatant (Lin, et al, 1995; Love, 1999; Matthews, 1994; Strommer, 1999).

The faculty also discussed with zest their interactions with peers. In fact, their dominant theme in both the narratives and focus group was their exuberance about working with other professors. The professors all felt that, “more contact with colleagues” invigorated their teaching and helped them gain professionally. This theme is prevalent in the literature (Finley, 1991; Gabelnick, et al, 1990; Matthews, 1994; Smith & Hunter, 1988; Strommer, 1999). For example, during the focus group the researcher observed how the professors were extremely complimentary to one another. They praised their colleagues teaching methodologies and their ability to work well together. It was almost as if the focus group provided them with the perfect opportunity to praise each other in front of other peers. However, they were not too polite to disagree. In fact, the professors did disagree on the issue of having similar teaching styles for teaching in a learning community. Two professors thought that there was a need for similar styles. “If our styles were in real conflict with one another it would impede what was going on.” However, several other professors felt that students learn best when presented with different teaching styles. They did politely compromise and conclude that the professors needed only to be committed to a common purpose.

The community college faculty did voice some negative concerns about their participation in learning communities. It was interesting to note that their concerns did not match the faculty concerns discussed in the literature. According to Stommer (1999) the greatest faculty complaints about participation in a learning community are the increased workload and difficulty working with peers. Neither of these issues was ever mentioned in the narratives or focus group. The community college faculty discussed very different concerns.

The faculty concerns centered on scheduling, financial and administrative issues. They were concerned about clustering three courses in a row, financial reimbursement, and the lack of stipends for learning community participation. They also felt that due to their busy schedules, finding time to coordinate with their peers was a constant problem. Several professors blamed this problem, and others, on the administration. They felt that the urban cluster had been created at the last minute with no thought to faculty schedules and coordination time. The professors expressed verbal hostility towards the administration. They mentioned that learning communities did not function from the top-down. They noted that administrators and even counselors could care less about the learning community initiative. The professors were frustrated with the placement of learning communities solely in the remedial curriculum. The extremely low academic levels of some of the students discouraged many professors. They even challenged the lack of communication and lack of support from administrators to faculty. They felt that more publicity concerning learning communities needed to be disseminated to the

students, faculty and administrators. This publicity theme also reoccurred in the student and administrative focus groups.

Three of the five professors actively participated in learning communities for a number of years. They have taught with enthusiasm in the learning communities program. However, throughout their experiences, they have witnessed first hand a lack of commitment by the administration to broaden the learning communities' initiative, and to give faculty recognition for their efforts in the program. For example, during the semester under study the administration at the urban campus decided to view the learning communities initiative as an experimental project and they secured stipends for the participating faculty. The main campus learning community was not awarded the same stipend. They became very upset with the administration, adding to their frustrations. It was this frustration that emerged in both their narratives and focus group regarding the administration's efforts.

Despite the negatives, the researcher sensed that the professors would continue to work in learning communities, but that they would welcome any recognition and increased involvement by the administration. It was obvious that any success of the current learning communities' initiative was completely faculty driven. It was apparent that they had organized and run the learning communities initiative at the college for years with very little intervention from administrators. These individuals truly believe in the learning communities' effort at the community college and what it has done for students, and for their own teaching.

### Administrative Conclusions

Six middle-level administrators with basic knowledge of the learning communities were selected to participate in an administrative focus group. The researcher used a single assessment tool, the focus group, to study the responses of administrators concerning their perceptions of learning communities. None of the administrators had previously taught in a learning community so they had no first hand experiences with student/student, student/professor and professor/professor interactions. Regardless of this limitation, the researcher felt that the administrators were extremely solution oriented in their responses. Due to their administrative experiences, they were capable of evaluating the learning communities program, recognizing the strengths and weaknesses, and offering suggestions without ever actually teaching in, or observing a learning community. For example, the administrators recognized that the success of a learning community depends on institutional commitment from the top-down. They emphasized the need for someone to be administratively responsible for the overall learning community initiative, and for a coordinator to be responsible for the day to day learning community activities. The group felt that the Office of Academic Affairs should be home for the operations of overseeing the project, implementing the budget, hiring the faculty, and evaluating the program. Similar to the faculty, the administrators mentioned that learning communities should be a campus wide initiative and exist in areas other than basic skills.

The researcher felt that the administrators offered some extremely relevant suggestions for improving the current learning communities' initiative at the community



college. In fact, many of their suggestions were consistent with the conditions for successful implementation of learning communities that are stated in the literature (Gabelnick, et al, 1990; Gardner & Levine, 1999; Jundt, et al, 1999; Levine & Tompkins, 1996; Lucas & Mott, 1996; Schroeder, et al, 1999). For example, the administrators suggested that the institution track the retention rates of the students participating in learning communities. They also felt that in order to familiarize the campus with the concept, more advertising with brochures and flyers was needed. The group emphasized the need for additional focus groups, meetings between the Vice President of Academic Affairs and learning communities' faculty and students, and workshops where faculty and students share their experiences. The administrators also suggested that the counselors and administrators visit learning community classes to observe the initiative first hand. The group discussed the need for a "point person" in the counseling office to oversee registration issues.

Finally, the researcher observed that the administrators, who had never participated in a learning community, were genuinely concerned about the outcome of the learning communities' initiative at their community college. Their concern was evident when they all agreed that they should personally remain enthusiastic, and take an active role in promoting interest in learning communities across the campus. It is imperative that these interested administrators take the lead and act as a liaison between faculty and higher level administration if the current initiative is to improve.

### Implementation Condition Conclusions

In comparison with the conditions for successful implementation of learning communities, the researcher found that the data revealed both strengths and weaknesses regarding the current learning communities' initiative.

The learning communities' program exhibited strengths in the implementation conditions of model selection, faculty recruitment, and ongoing assessment. The first strength of the program was in the selection of a model conducive for the campus environment. The linked model was appropriately selected due to its simplicity and adaptability to initial learning community initiatives. Another success of the program was with the selection of faculty. The faculty that volunteered to teach in the learning communities were enthusiastic, hard-working professionals who supported the learning community philosophies in their teaching. As evidenced by their responses in their narratives and focus groups, they were committed to collaborating with their peers to create a positive, student-centered environment for all their students. The professors were concerned about a lack of administrative support and a lack of professional development opportunities. They felt that adjunct involvement in learning communities was important, but realized that adjuncts have limited time for curriculum coordination. The community college initiative also satisfied the implementation condition of ongoing assessment. All previous learning community efforts surveyed students at the beginning, middle and end of the semester in order to obtain vital information for program and teaching assessment. However, faculty and administrators were never asked for feedback concerning the program.

In comparing the current learning communities' initiative to the conditions for successful implementation, the researcher found numerous weaknesses in the implementation conditions of ownership, recruitment of students, relationships between academic and student affairs, and in funding.

One of the major weaknesses of the learning communities was in the area of ownership. The administrators and faculty mentioned that the current initiative lacked institutional involvement and commitment from the top-down. No administrative organization had claimed ownership to the project. In fact, it was evident in the faculty and administrative responses that the project had been faculty driven for years. The faculty continuously referred to the lack of administrative support.

The data revealed that the recruitment of students had also been unsuccessful. The institution had not advertised properly with brochures and flyers. The major recruitment method was through counselors and even this was unsatisfactory, since some of the counselors indicated that they were unclear of the learning communities' philosophy. In addition, the college had not organized the learning communities around popular courses or courses that met general education requirement in order to entice student participation. In fact, the community college had focused on linked and clustered remedial courses.

Another area of weakness appeared to be in the development of a relationship between academic and student affairs personnel. At the institution under study there had never been such a relationship. In fact, no collected data ever mentioned this topic. It

appears that the faculty had organized and arranged all the out of class student activities without help from student affairs personnel.

Appropriate funding is a necessary condition for the successful implementation of learning communities. Any learning community initiative needs a budget or external grant money to pay for stipends, faculty development opportunities and for student activities. At the community college there was no grant funding and only a minimal budget for student activities. Some faculty received stipends while others did not which caused faculty dissension with the administration.

### Final Conclusions

The researcher's findings from the three assessment measures of surveys, narratives, and focus groups revealed that the students, faculty and administrators examined learning communities from the point of view of their specific interest group. The student themes centered on relationships with peers and faculty. Faculty emphasized colleague interactions, student bonding, administrative concerns and personal experiences in their learning communities. The administrators focused on institutional issues and offered a wealth of solutions to revitalize the learning community initiative at the community college. There were also numerous overlapping themes. For instance, all three interest groups mentioned overall satisfaction with the learning communities' program and supported its continuation at the community college. They all felt a need for more advertising of learning communities, and the need for learning communities to exist in curriculums other than basic skills. The administrators and the faculty were both concerned with a lack of administrative support from the top-down. Data from the

students and faculty supported many common themes, such as specific interactions and experiences with each other. Thus, the researcher concluded that the collective data from the three very distinct populations offered a complete profile of the learning communities' initiative at the community college under study.

In retrospect, the researcher would have been interested in holding an additional focus group with representation from all three populations with the addition of some higher level administrators. The researcher then could have compared the data generated from the individual interest groups with the data generated from a mixed focus group in order to observe variations in their perspectives on learning communities.

When comparing the collected data to the ultimate conditions for implementing a learning community, the researcher collected some data that differed from the results reported in the literature. Much of the recorded quantitative and qualitative data found in the literature on learning communities discussed positive student and faculty reactions, program strengths, and statistically recorded increased retention and completion rates (Avens & Zelley, 1992; Eanes, 1992; Isbell, 1996; Costello & Stahl, 1996; Lucas & Mott, 1996; Tinto & Love, 1995; Tokuno & Campbell, 1992). Few studies discussed the problems with implementing learning communities or the weaknesses of their programs.

Another important part of this study was the comparison of the collected data with the conditions for successful implementation of a learning community. During the initial design of the study the researcher contemplated comparing the collected data with another learning community initiative. The problem that arose was the selection of a "perfect" learning community initiative to use as the model learning community. Most

of the learning communities that were mentioned in the literature (Avens & Zelle, 1992; Eanes, 1992; Isbell, 1996; Costello & Stahl, 1996; Lucas & Mott, 1996; Tinto & Love, 1995; Tokuno & Campbell, 1992) did not fit the demographics of the learning community under study. Consequently, the researcher selected to compare the data with the standard conditions for the successful implementation of learning communities. During examination, the collected data easily compared to these conditions and provided the researcher with recommendations to improve the current learning communities initiative at the community college.

#### Recommendations for the Learning Community Initiative

The collective data from the surveys, narratives and focus groups in comparison with the conditions for successfully implementing a learning community, provided the researcher with extensive information that could be used to improve, broaden and increase student, faculty and institutional support for the current learning communities' initiative. The following recommendations need to be examined and addressed by the current learning communities' initiative.

#### Administrative recommendations:

1. During the initial phase of learning communities, the institution needs to become committed to the program from the top-down.
2. The administrative ownership for the entire project probably should come from the Office of Academic Affairs. There is also the need for an additional appointment of a coordinator for the everyday learning community responsibilities.

3. The institution should continue to use the linked or clustered models since their simplicity adapts well to the learning communities' initiative at the community college.
4. A relationship between the academic affairs and student affairs personnel on campus needs to be explored.
5. Meetings should be held between the Vice President of Academic Affairs and the learning communities' faculty and students in order to discuss the needs of the program.
6. In order to increase administrative and faculty participation in the program, workshops must be held where faculty and students share their experiences.
7. There is a need for an extensive advertising campaign at the community college to get the word out to students, faculty and administrators about the learning communities' initiative.
8. To recruit students into the program the administrators need to involve students in the recruiting effort through the use of peer advising and peer mentoring.
9. Learning communities must be a campus wide initiative with links and clusters in all areas of the curriculum and not just in basic skills as previously done.

**Faculty recommendations:**

10. The institution must continue to use the innovative, dedicated faculty that selected to teach in the learning communities program. But, the program needs to increase the number of participating faculty.
11. Faculty at the community college need to have input in the selection of the colleagues that will be paired or clustered together.
12. The institution must further explore the use of adjunct faculty in the learning communities' effort.
13. Faculty development opportunities must be provided at the community college for the participating faculty.

**Funding recommendations:**

14. Faculty should continue to receive additional funding for participation in a learning community, but all faculty should receive an equal stipend.
15. Grant funding needs to be sought to subsidize the learning communities' initiative.

**Counseling recommendations:**

16. Administrators and counselors need to be briefed prior to registration about the learning communities' offerings for that semester.
17. A "point person" must be identified in the counseling office to oversee registration and counseling issues.
18. Administrators and counselors should visit learning community classes at the community college to observe the initiative first hand.



19. Counselors need to visit existing classes at the institution to promote student participation in learning communities rather than singling out students to recruit them to the program.

Assessment recommendations:

20. The community college needs to continue the current assessment methods of surveys and narratives. In addition, a 20-minute interview with each student to validate his or her progress in the program could be added to the assessment tools.
21. Additional focus group assessment is needed at the community college with students, faculty and administrators attending the same session.
22. The institution needs to track the retention and graduation rates of the community college students that participate in learning community initiatives.

Implications of the Study to Higher Education

In addition to demonstrating program effectiveness, the information collected on the experiences of students and faculty in learning communities could be used to increase student and faculty participation. Student feedback could be used to attract new students to the program. A study of this nature could affect the decisions of other faculty at an institution concerning future participation in a learning community. Since the learning community initiative is in its initial phase, deans and administrators considering the addition of linked courses in their division's curriculum could also benefit from this study. Sharing evidence that learning communities are successful with the entire college

community could help to ensure greater institutional support for the program (Ketcheson & Levine, 1999).

Financial support is necessary for learning communities to continue at an institution. Therefore, information concerning their success will support an increased financial and operational commitment by an institution (Mackay, et al, 1996). Other similar institutions considering the development of learning communities would be interested in the results of this study. As the number of colleges implementing learning communities increases, there is a greater demand for information supporting the success of learning communities. Innovative programs are often met with skepticism and thus, information supporting the creation of learning communities is imperative to establish credibility (Mackay, et al, 1996).

Examples of best practice could be shared with the broader higher education community. The data collected of what worked and what does not work could be shared at regional and national conferences. Access to program level evaluation could provide other institutions with recommendations to improve practice and to avoid future problems (Ketcheson & Levine, 1999). While positive evaluations of a learning community help to sell an institution on the learning community concept, “the compiled data, both positive and negative provide a rich ground upon which improvements to the learning community can be made” (Jundt, Etzkorn, & Johnson, 1999 p. 37). These results could be important for any college or university with a flexible admissions policy, in support of a commitment to serving a diverse population.

### Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the above findings, several issues should be explored further. A follow-up study should be conducted to determine whether the results from this case study would be similar to the results found in other learning communities at the community college under study. Since each learning community has a unique personality, there is a need to replicate this study in order to validate the findings of this research. In addition, the researcher needs to be aware of any limitations introduced into the results of the study due to differences between the group of students included in the study and the overall population of eligible learning community students (Palomba & Banta, 1999).

Further, ongoing assessment of the learning community initiative is necessary to continuously evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the program. The use of surveys and narratives should be continued as a quick method of learning community assessment. However, of the three methods of assessment, the researcher felt that the best measure of student, faculty and administrative perceptions and attitudes concerning participation in the learning communities' initiative was through the focus group assessment method. An independent moderator was used in order to maintain objectivity in the study. In addition, the study followed the characteristics of a valid focus group with, "clearly defined objectives, good recruiting of quality participants, competent moderating and exacting analysis of data" (Franklin & Knight, 1995, p.6). During the focus group sessions, the dialogue, combined with the body language and voice intonations, provided the researcher with an accurate account of the student, faculty and administrative perceptions toward learning communities. Therefore, the researcher would recommend

the continued use of this assessment method for future learning communities. The institution should conduct unique student, faculty and administrative focus groups, as well as mixed focus groups.

In addition, future longitudinal studies should be conducted on the population of the two learning communities under study. The retention and graduation rates of these students, as well as their success in subsequent courses should be examined. The students on the urban campus requested participation in another learning community for the fall semester. The administration at the community college, for the first time, created a learning community for these students. The eight remaining students from the urban learning community will be registered for a Composition I /Sociology learning community for the fall 2000 semester. A qualitative study needs to be conducted to follow these students through the new learning community in order to examine their success rates, and to monitor changes in their attitudes and perceptions regarding participation in the new learning community. The qualitative data collected from this study could be compared with the additional qualitative data, such as surveys and narratives, collected from the new learning community. Since the student responses were identified in the current study, the researcher would be able to compare individual responses from the current study with responses from the new learning community. The researcher could obtain valuable data regarding changes in student attitudes during participation in subsequent learning communities.

Another suggestion for future research would be to conduct a comparative study where the retention rates of students in a learning community, both in the urban and the

main campus, were compared with the retention rates of students in the same environment but not in a learning community.

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## Appendix A

### Faculty Guidelines for Learning Communities

The following outlines the expectations for professors teaching a learning community. These guidelines have also been established to provide channels of on-going feedback to the Learning Communities Committee for the purpose of continued program improvement.

#### **In preparation, prior to the semester:**

- Meet with the other faculty member(s) for the particular learning community to discuss:
  - Goals and expectations of the learning community. (How will the courses and content overlap? What kind of student group dynamic might be created?)
  - Coordination of syllabi. At the minimum, this should include scheduling exams so that they do not fall on the same day. It also may include making joint assignments (readings, papers, etc.), inviting guest speakers, or out-of-class events (meals, trips, etc.)
- Attend any scheduled faculty development activities.
- Submit copies of your learning community syllabus or course outline to the Learning Communities Committee chairperson to be kept on file for future reference.

#### **During the first two weeks of the semester, meet at least once to:**

- Share class lists and student information gathered. (Confirm who is enrolled in all classes, etc.)
- Refine goals of the learning community. (What are student expectations?)

#### **During the semester:**

- Meet regularly with other faculty member(s) to discuss individual student progress and general progress of the entire learning community toward its objectives.
- Visit each other's classes, if possible. Look at "modeling" of assignments or activities, give feedback to one another, reinforce any topics that overlap. (Students especially benefit from hearing different views on the subject.)

#### **Mid-semester:**

- Conduct teacher-student conferences, preferably in conjunction with the other faculty member(s), to discuss student's progress.

#### **End of semester:**

- Conduct evaluation of the learning community experience (with survey/evaluation tool to be completed either individually or collaboratively). A survey or other evaluation instrument will be distributed to you for this purpose. Return completed evaluations to the Learning Communities chairperson.



- Hold teacher-student conferences, preferably in conjunction with the other faculty member(s), to discuss students' performance and advise them accordingly.

**Post-semester:**

- Report to the Learning Communities Committee on your experience: semester's progress, student dynamics, tips for future learning communities, things you would or would not do again.

**What students can expect from this learning community:**

- an outline for each course
- a reasonable amount of time for assignments to be done
- individual attention from the professors both inside and outside of the classroom
- student interaction within the classroom
- assignments that ask for ideas and opinions
- assignments that require reflection
- assignments that make connections to the real world
- individual and/or group interviews
- contact after the class is finished
- tutorial support from student services
- help addressing administrative problems
- answers to your questions when we can find them; honesty when we can't

**The learning community classroom journal:**

In order to communicate we are going to have a journal that travels from classroom to classroom, from student to student, to teacher too. Everyone should write in it. Everyone can read it and comment on it if they want or just write something else. The Professors will take it home on weekends and give feedback on anything that has been written in it so that no one will feel that his or her idea was ignored.

This is a good place to write something you don't feel like bringing up in class. You can be anonymous if you want (even disguise your handwriting). Of course, rules of courtesy apply – don't aim to hurt people, but certainly raise issues if something is bothering you. Sharing frustration is more comforting than trying to shoulder it alone. Good news is welcome too!

## Appendix B

### Learning Community

#### Writing skills III

#### Reading skills III

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A learning Community occurs when a group of people work collaboratively toward shared intellectual goals. Our Learning Community exists because two teachers and a group of students taking the same two courses together will share such an experience.

#### *What are the benefits?*

- It is student-centered rather than teacher centered
- It links course material
- It helps you develop supportive peer groups
- It helps narrow the gap between social and academic needs
- It makes you feel involved and motivates you to persist
- It requires you to be active rather than passive
- It allows you to participate in structuring the courses

#### *What are some of the goals for this learning community?*

- To have you reflect on what you are learning as it relates to your personal experiences
- To give each of you the opportunity for individual expression
- To let you build relationships by working together as partners and teams
- To let you experience by doing (rather than just listening and memorizing)
- To provide independent learners by reducing teacher authority
- To provide plenty of feedback to you and get feedback from you

#### *What can you expect from this learning community?*

- An outline for each course
- A reasonable amount of time for assignments to be done
- Individual attention from the professors
- Student interaction within the classroom
- Assignments that ask for ideas, opinions, reflection, and connections to the real world
- Individual and/or group conferences
- Help addressing administrative problems

#### *The learning community classroom journal:*

In order to communicate we are going to have a journal that travels from classroom to classroom. Everyone (students and teachers) should write in it, read it, and comment on it or just write something else. This is a good place to write something you

don't feel like bringing up in class, anonymously if you want. Of course, rules of courtesy apply, but certainly raise issues if something is bothering you.



## Appendix D

### Learning Communities Survey 2

Please answer the following questions briefly and return this to your teacher by the last day of classes. You need not give your name.

1. Were your goals for this learning community met? Explain.
2. Has this learning community changed your attitude toward school, either positively or negatively? Explain.
3. If you were a teacher in this learning community, what would you change about it?
4. Explain what you liked about this learning community.
5. Would you advise another student to take this learning community?
6. Do you plan to return to school next semester? What factors have influenced your decision?

## **Appendix E**

### **Student Narrative Assignment**

**Pretend you are telling a friend what this semester in the reading and writing learning community was like---what you learned, how you interacted with other students and the teachers, what changes you would make in the learning community experience, anything.... Write as much as you can.**

## Appendix F

### Faculty Narrative (Reflection Piece)

- Assessment efforts at Temple University rely on reflective pieces by faculty to gather valuable insights on the experience of teaching in a Learning Community (Levine & Tompkins, 1999).
- Reflective pieces are essays written by faculty completing a semester of teaching a course as part of a Learning Community.
- A faculty narrative affords faculty the opportunity to look back on the elements of the Learning Community program and to share what worked well and what did not.
- In these essays faculty respond to the following questions:
  1. *What were your original expectations for teaching in this learning community program? Given those expectations, in what ways did the experience meet or not meet them?*
  2. *What else stands out, in terms of observations and discoveries? What did you notice about your students, your colleagues teaching, and your own teaching?*
  3. *What issues need attention in the future: what might future learning community teaching teams consider? What might the institution consider and address?*
  4. *As a result of teaching in this program, what will you take forward in your work?*

## Appendix G

**INFORMED CONSENT FORM****Widener University****Center for Education**

Title of Investigation: Field Observation Case Study: The Learning Communities Movement in Higher Education

Investigator: Jane Weber

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

This is to certify that I, \_\_\_\_\_, hereby agree to participate as a volunteer in a qualitative study as an authorized part of the education and research program of Widener University, Center for Education under the supervision of Jane Weber.

The investigation has been defined and fully explained to me by Jane Weber, and I understand her explanation. I have been given an opportunity to ask any questions that I may have had, and all such questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I understand that I am free to deny any answers to specific items or questions in interviews or questionnaires.

I understand that any data or answers to questions will remain confidential with regard to my identity.

I understand that the results of this investigation may be reported in a published study.

I further understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and terminate my participation at any time.

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Birth \_\_\_\_\_ Subject's Signature \_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix H

### Demographic Profile

Name _____			
Last	First	Middle	

**Address** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date of Birth** \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_  
month                  day                  year

**Ethnicity - \_\_\_\_\_ Asian American/ Asian/ Pacific Islander**  
**\_\_\_\_\_ Black/ African American/ African**  
**\_\_\_\_\_ Hispanic/ Latino/ Chicano/ Spanish**  
**\_\_\_\_\_ Native American/ American Indian**  
**\_\_\_\_\_ White/ Caucasian/ European**

**Are you a United States Citizen** \_\_\_\_\_yes \_\_\_\_\_no

**Is English your native language** \_\_\_\_\_yes \_\_\_\_\_no

**Gender**             male             female

**List all colleges attended** \_\_\_\_\_

**What was your intent in enrolling at the community college?**

☐ To earn transfer credits  
☐ To develop/ enhance job skills  
☐ To earn a degree or certificate  
☐ Personal enrichment/ interest

**Major field of study** \_\_\_\_\_

**Number of credits accumulated at the community college.** \_\_\_\_\_

**Number of years/semester attending the community college.** \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix I**

### **Student Focus Group Interview Questions**

1. Think back to the beginning of the semester, what was your initial reason for participating in the learning community?
2. Originally, what did you think a learning community would be? Has this view changed now that you have completed the course?
3. What were your first reactions to the learning community concept, the other students, and the professors? How has this view changed now that you have completed the course?
4. What have you observed as the differences or similarities between your learning community and your other courses?
5. What other courses would you link into a learning community? Why?
6. What do you think our community college should do with learning communities in the future?
7. To help make other students aware of the concept, how should our college promote learning communities?

## **Appendix J**

### **Faculty Focus Group Questions**

1. Think back to your initial involvement with learning communities. Why did you become involved in the learning communities' project at the community college?
2. What were your perceptions and attitudes about teaching in a learning community? What did you think a learning community would be?
3. How are your perceptions about teaching in a learning community different from what actually occurred in your paired teaching experience?
4. Discuss both your social and academic interactions with the faculty member you were paired with in the learning community project. Did the experience meet your expectations? How?
5. Describe the ways, if any, that you have had to alter your teaching methods/styles to fit a learning community teaching format. How do they differ from the other courses you teach?
6. What do you view as the negatives and positives of your faculty participation in a learning community?
7. Describe your observations concerning student participation in a learning community. What do you view as student strengths and weaknesses in learning community participation?
8. React on the different tools such as, survey, community journals, and narratives used to assess learning communities at the community college. What works well and what should be changed? Why?
9. What changes should be made at our college concerning the learning community initiative? How can these changes be initiated?

## **Appendix K**

### **Administration Focus Group Questions**

1. What administrators should be involved in learning communities and what should their roles be?
2. Do you think there should be a separate budget for learning communities and what expenditures do you think should be included?
3. What courses do you think should be paired or clustered in a learning community? Why?
4. How do you think learning communities fit with the mission of our college?
5. What do you see as the strengths of the learning community initiative, the weaknesses?
6. Should changes be made in the learning community initiative at our community college? What role would you play in making these changes?

## Appendix L

## Learning Communities Survey I

Urban Campus – 8 returned surveys

Questions	Data Source
Question #1	
Why did you choose this learning community, these courses?	<p>“the way the schedule was set up for the courses offered.” (B1)</p> <p>“I was interested in Psychology so I chose the learning community.”(B2)</p> <p>“I did not choose the learning community because I didn’t know anything about it. (But if I would have known I would’ve choose the learning community anyway) I had to take Reading and Writing but found out later I also had to take Psychology.”(B16)</p> <p>“ I thought it would be a good idea to learn with the same people everyday.” (B6)</p> <p>“Because I could bring my strengths to help others and they can use theirs to help me with my weaknesses.”(B5)</p> <p>“ I think a learning community offers better communication with the teachers and it also offers one on one help.” (B7)</p> <p>“My advisor chose this learning community but I wanted to join because of the Psychology course.” (B15)</p> <p>“When I was doing my schedule my advisor told me that studies have shown that students do well when they work together. Then she told what exactly is a learning community was, so then I decided to take these classes.” (B10)</p>
Question # 2	
What are at least two of your goals for this learning community?	<p>“To learn to write better and learn to take notes.” (B1)</p>

“To touch base with psychology (become more familiar) and to establish excellent writing skills.” (B2)

“My two goals are to have classmates that I can interact with and study with as a result of taking all 3 classes together. Also, having teachers who know what we’re learning in other classes is good too because the work can be combined to help the students.”(B16)

“To pass all classes and make new friends.” (B6)

“To learn how to be comfortable around others and to learn how to get more out of my classes.”(B5)

“To improve writing skills, to learn the fundamentals of psychology for a future career.”(B7)

“I plan to gain credits and begin my regular college courses.” (B15)

“To get out of these basic skills classes and learn things the proper or correct way.” (B10)

### Question #3

Has your previous learning experience been positive or negative, overall? Explain

“They have been positive because I have learned to ask for help.” (B1)

“My previous learning experiences have been positive. The reason why is because I try to make every experience in my life positive.” (B2)

“My previous learning experience in the community has been very positive and I hope that I can experience it again next semester. I feel like I’m with the same students every class.” (B16)

“More negative than positive because all my papers are one on top of the other.” (60% negative and 40% positive) (B6)

“It’s been negative because I’d be so nervous that I had the wrong answer and I would never speak out or participate in class.” (B5)

“Positive.” (B7)

“So far it’s been overwhelming. Due to my pregnancy, home life and school, it’s kind of hard to keep up with my assignments. They seem to be back to back.”(B15)

"It has or was negative, but now I some what enjoy learning. These last few weeks I have learned a lot of important and interesting things."(B10)

Question # 4

If this is not your first semester here,  
Give at least two (2) reasons why you  
decided to return this semester. (If this is your  
first semester, skip this question).

"Because I want to finish my basic skills courses as soon as possible. I like college better than high school." (B1)

"The reason I returned a second semester is because I would like to further my education."(B2)

" Because I want to get my associates degree to become a substitute teacher for the city schools."(B6)

"To higher my education and to prove to myself that I can be something and do something with my age." (B5)

"When I first decided to come to college I planned to do two years here. I also wanted to come back this semester to get my basic skills classes out of the way." (B10)

Learning Communities Survey I  
Main Campus – 9 returned surveys

Questions

Data Source

**Question #1**

**Why did you choose this learning community, these courses?**

“The guidance counselor signed me up.”(A2)  
 “I choose this learning community because it is local to my house.” (A13)  
 “I thought it would help me. I would understand and do better.”(A14)  
 “So I can learn how to become a better writer and read more often.” (A12)  
 “I choose the learning community because I thought that it would help me learn better.”(A9)  
 “Because it was the only class left.” (A1)  
 “It was an open course.”(A5)  
 “To help me be able to learn better.”(A4)

**Question # 2**

**What are at least two (2) of your goals for this learning community?**

“To pass these classes so I don’t have to do them again and so I can move on.”(A2)  
 “My goals are to complete what I have started and earn as much college credits as possible.” (A13)  
 “To get better grades then last semester. And to really understand what I am taught.” (A14)  
 “To pass and move on to the next level. To learn as much as I possibly can.” (A12)  
 “My two goals are to pass the class, definitely and to enhance my reading and writing skills.”(A9)  
 “to pass the class and to learn.” (A1)



"To finish and be able to write and read better." (A5)

"To be able to make better grades to study harder." (A4)

"Basic American sign language and computers." (A15)

### Question # 3

Has your previous learning experience been positive or negative, overall? Explain.

"My previous learning experience has been positive because of the teachers I had in high school all seemed to care what you did."

(A2)

"My learning experience has been positive, so far attending this college." (A13)

"I really like this class and I feel that I am more open so I guess it is been positive."

(A14)

"I believe my learning experience has been a positive one because if it wasn't then I would not have made it this far in school." (A9)

"It has been positive because I have had good teachers." (A1)

"In high school my learning experience has been negative." (A5)

"It has been positive because all my teachers have been very helpful to me." (A4)

"Positive because I am a hard work and I never give up of what I strive to do." (A15)

### Question #4

If this is not your first semester here, give at least two (2) reasons why you decided to return this semester.

"I return to this college so I could earn more credits. Finally, I return so I can enhance my job skills." (A13)

"The people and instructors are very helpful." (A12)

"Because it was inexpensive." (A1)

"I will like to play soccer next semester and earn transfer credits." (A5)

“Nice environment, nice teachers and peers.” (A4)

“Because this school gives me many opportunities, from what I can see.”(A15)

## Learning Communities Survey II

Urban Campus – 4 returned

Questions	Data Source
<p><b>Question #1</b> Were your goals for this learning community met? Explain.</p>	<p>“To come to class to just learn.” (B15)          “I didn’t start with any goals.” (B10)          “Yes, my goals in the learning community were met, for I wanted to learn how to work with others. Now I know how.” (B17)          “Yes, I’m more into reading than I was before.” (B5)</p>
<p><b>Question #2</b> Has this learning community changed your attitude toward school, either positively or negatively? Explain.</p>	<p>“It has given me a positive attitude toward school. I was afraid to be here in the beginning, but with everyone helping each other I felt more confident.” (B15)          “It made me feel more negative and frustrated.” (B10)          “Yes, the learning community has changed my attitude towards school because we all worked together.” (B17)          “Yes, my attitude toward school is better than ever. I learned that you can have a nice relationship with your teacher and classmates.” (B5)</p>
<p><b>Question # 3</b> If you were a teacher in this learning community, what would you change about it?</p>	

## Question #4

Explain what you liked about this learning community.

"I would make sure that I'm allotting enough time for my assignments, and make sure that they are scheduled not so close to the other teachers assignments so the students won't be swamped." (B15)

"Attendance policy – if you know what your doing you shouldn't have to come." (B10)

"I wouldn't change anything." (B17)

"Nothing." (B5)

## Question #5

Would you advise another student to take this learning community?

"I liked learning together and the people in the class. I also liked the teachers." (B15)

"The students and how they stick together." (B10).

"I liked how the teachers and students all worked together." (B17)

"Doing things together besides classwork and going out in the community together." (B5)

## Question # 6

Do you plan to return to school next semester?  
What factors have influenced your decision?

"Yes, I would." (B15)

"Yes, it would be good for them." (B10)

"Yes, I would advise another student to take this learning community." (B17)

"Yes." (B5)

"The learning community made me want to come back because I'm more confident." (B15)

"Yes, I need to continue my education." (B10)

"I do plan on attending school next semester. I like money and the only way I can get it is if I continue to go to school." (B17)

"Being in the community." (B5)

## Learning Communities Survey II

Main Campus – 8 returned

Questions	Data Source
<p>Question #1</p> <p>Were your goals for this community met? Explain.</p>	<p>“Yes, I learned a lot.” (A6)</p> <p>“Yes, I needed to refresh my memory and learn a little more before I got into English I and other classes.” (A13)</p> <p>“My goals were met because I find that my reading speed has improved.” (A11)</p> <p>“Yes, I feel more comfortable writing and with reading understanding.” (A2)</p> <p>“Yes, I met some new friends.” (A14)</p> <p>“Yes, I met new friends.” (A8)</p> <p>“Yes, I learned what I needed to become a better writer and reader.” (A3)</p>
<p>Question #2</p> <p>Has this learning community changed your attitude toward school, either positively or negatively? Explain.</p>	<p>“No, school is still interesting to me.” (A6)</p> <p>“Positively, it made me actually go to school.” (A13)</p> <p>“It has not changed my attitude towards school because I had a positive attitude from the start.” (A11)</p> <p>“Yes, I feel more comfortable writing and with reading understanding.” (A2)</p> <p>“Yes, I met some new friends.” (A14)</p> <p>“Yes, I met new friends.” (A8)</p>

## Question # 3

If you were a teacher in this learning community, what would you change about it?

"A little bit, it showed me that teachers are here to help not hurt."  
(A3)

"Not being able to talk in the lab."  
(A6)

"I would really take out the journal stuff." (A13)

"I would give the students more time in class to write their papers." (A11)

"I don't think I would change anything." (A2)

"More one on one with the students."  
(A14)

"No homework, no exams." (A8)

"Nothing." (A3)

## Question #4

Explain what you liked about this learning community.

"I met a lot of nice people in the learning community." (A6)

"It was small classes and good teachers." (A13)

"I like that I got to interact with my peers." (A11)

"I like getting to know the other students which made me feel comfortable in the class." (A2)

"The teachers talked to each other."  
(A14)

"You get to know people." (A8)

"Teachers were real helpful for learning." (A3)

## Question #5

Would you advise another student to take this learning community?

"Yes, you can learn a lot easier because classes are a lot smaller."  
(A6)

"Yes, if they needed help I would suggest it to them." (A13)

"I would advise another student to take the learning community because it helps students to make friends, and it also helps them to better able themselves to help other people."

(A11)

"Yes, I would advise another student to take learning community." (A2)

"Yes." (A14)

"Yes." (A8)

"Yes, it can only help, not hurt."

(A3)

#### Question #6

Do you plan to return to school next semester?

What factors have influenced your decision?

"Yes, I want to be able to have a career and live on my own." (A6)

"Yes, passing this classes makes me want to come." (A13)

"Yes, because while school is a challenge, it is also very fun." (A11)

"Yes, I'm returning next semester because I need to get a career." (A2)

"Yes, I hoped I could get this type of class again." (A14)

"Yes, it was fun." (A8)

"Yes, a lot influenced me." (A3)



## Appendix M

**Student Narratives**  
Urban campus – 6 returned

Questions/themes	Data Source
Overall comments about the learning community experience.	<p>“ I feel as though the learning community was a great experience.” (B1)</p> <p>“ The learning community was an okay experience.” (B6)</p> <p>“This was my first semester back in school and I am loving it. I can’t believe how long it took me to get into the swing of things. I think the learning community is a good way of learning and communicating. I especially like the way my school schedule interacts with my work schedule.” (B7)</p> <p>“I love the learning community, everything it stands for.” (B5)</p> <p>“The learning community was a positive environment.” (B2)</p>
What did the students learn from the learning community?	<p>“ In psychology I learned many interesting things about people’s emotions, behaviors and theories. I learned to refine my writing skills.” (B10)</p> <p>“So far I’ve learned a few interesting facts and theories in psychology, and I’ve also learned how to improve my writing style, but aside from that I don’t feel as though I’ve learned that much, or as much as I should be learning this semester.” (B1)</p> <p>“I learned a lot from the community.” (B 6)</p>

How did you interact with the students and with your teachers?

“In the learning community this semester, I learn a lot of things.”

(B5)

“I learned that working with the same people on a just about every day basis gave me the chance to get to know people and to see how other people work with the same topic I’d worked with.” (B2)

“I interacted great with the other students. I enjoy being in class with the students in my community because they help make things fun when your bored to death by the teachers. The teachers on the other hand isn’t so great. At first I thought I related to them, but now it just feels like their rushing us, and their just working to get their quota and are not making sure we understand what’s going on.”(B1)

“The students were very easy to get along. They respect you as well as you would respect them. If we put our minds and hearts to it we could achieve any goal. Like the time we gave the sandwiches to the homeless people. I really enjoyed that day and wish we could have many, many more days like it.” (B6)

“I feel that some of us are more intellectual than others. The professors were good teachers for this program because I think they enjoy and believe in education.” (B7)

“My teachers are wonderful. I never knew you could have a relationship with your teachers as I have with mine. My teachers are very open. That makes you feel as if you can come and talk to them at any time about anything. I have also never

interacted with fellow classmates the way I do now. I think that being with the same group of people every class makes you closer to one another. You build a better relationship with those classmates. You are not afraid to ask questions and also ask for help from each other. You are more of a family than just students in a class together. You learn about each other and that's what makes you close." (B5)

"The teachers of the learning community were easy going and were well aware of what the other teachers were doing in their classes." (B2)

What changes would you make in the learning community?

"I would change the fact that in the beginning if your failing one class then you have to withdraw from all the classes. I would also have the teachers teach and give out assignments at a steady pace, not going real slow in the beginning and rushing us at the end." (B1)

"The only thing that I would change about the learning community is adding more students that are more mentally expanded and not so inhibited." (B7)

"There aren't any changes I would change about the learning community, it was an experience I will never forget." (B2)

Student Narratives  
Main Campus – 8 returned

Questions/themes	Data Source
Overall comments about learning Community experience	<p data-bbox="336 509 1347 547">“I thought the learning community was a really good experience. I liked being</p> <p data-bbox="229 582 1129 619">with all the same people for both my reading and writing class.” (A6)</p> <p data-bbox="908 654 1382 837">“Well friend, I thought this learning community was a good experience. In a regular class you usually just go in sit down and get up at the end.”(A14)</p> <p data-bbox="908 837 1374 1056">“I enjoyed the learning community classes I had this semester. I feel as though I received the personal attention I needed. I also felt comfortable in the class because the same students were in both.” (A2)</p> <p data-bbox="908 1056 1390 1313">“I liked being in the learning community because it is a much smaller class and we all work together like one big team. The learning community was a very good experience for me. I felt I learned a lot.” (A4)</p>
What did the students learn from the learning community?	<p data-bbox="908 1390 1358 1498">“Well, I think that the class helped me a lot in how I study and how I work with other students.” (A1)</p> <p data-bbox="908 1498 1390 1645">“I feel that in my writing class I have become a better writer. I really never knew how to write an essay or how to do a portfolio.”(A3)</p> <p data-bbox="908 1645 1358 1792">“I have learned that everybody in a learning community has different weaknesses. I felt I learned a lot.” (A4)</p> <p data-bbox="908 1792 1390 1864">“My writing class was very interesting. My professor made sure</p>

she went over how to start an essay and how to complete one. She went over grammar, punctuation, and I also completed a comparison and contrast essay in class.” (A13)

“This semester in the reading and writing learning program I learned a lot of things. I learned that any kind of essay or paper you write is never perfect. There is always room for improvement. I also learned how to read a book and be able to comprehend it better. I was never able to read a decent amount of pages and be able to understand them all. I also learned how to break up sentences and put the punctuation and the right grammar words in.” (A11)

How did you interact with the students and with your teachers?

“In this community I had the chance to interact with the other students not just in one class but also in the other. The teachers had the chance to talk to each other about the students and ways of teaching.” (A14)

“I was able to study with my fellow students more easily because we spent so much time together and because we helped each other back.” (A1)

“The class with the same kids was cool because if you missed a class they could tell you the assignments. I think because the classes were small so if you needed one on one with the teachers they were there. I thought the teachers were understanding too. These people don’t want to fail you they just want to help you to get to the next level. So I liked it.” (A3)

"I also felt comfortable in the class because the same students were in both. We really got to know each other this semester which enabled us to help each other out. For my first semester back after being out of school for five years it was a comfortable environment for me to come into." (A2)

"My reaction towards other students in class was enjoyable. I received the chance to meet new friends and learned great things about them. However, I learned more from my professor than anyone else in my class." (A13)

"The teacher was very nice too. She let us talk to our classmates as long as it had to do with what she was talking about. She got us all in a discussion some how or another. (A11)

What changes would you make in the learning community ?

"I would make the changes to make learning a lot more fun and not so serious all the time." (A4)

"We really didn't get that much homework, but the thing that most people did not like was that we had to write a journal." (A11)

## Appendix N

### Faculty Narratives

Questions	Data Source
<p>Question # 1</p> <p>What were your original expectations for teaching in this learning community program? Given those expectations, in what ways did the experience meet or not meet them?</p>	<p>“Working in a learning community is not new to me. I taught in two learning communities in the fall as well. This particular learning community experience was similar but also different in some ways. As a teacher in a learning community I have come to expect several things. I expect a type of bonding to occur between the students and between the teacher and the students. I expect a type of bonding to occur between the teachers as well. And ultimately, I expect these bonds to work in ways, which support learning.” (F5)</p> <p>“Since I have taught as part of a learning community for many years, my expectation was that this group would become bonded socially within and outside of class. However, I did learn that in a previous learning community that that bonding does not always manifest itself in the same way for each group. This semester’s experience proved that observation to be accurate.” (F2)</p> <p>“I expect the learning community to give me more contact with colleagues. I expect the students to work together better and to perform better. I did interact with my colleague in the learning community but mostly by e-mail. We should have arranged that the other teacher doesn’t have a class during the first class time to get more interaction. We went to lunch three times, but even that didn’t feel like enough. The</p>

students didn't do so well because, we now realize, they were being registered into the LC by the learning disabilities department.”

(F1)

“I really had few expectations when I began, partly because the assignment was given to me shortly before the start of the semester. I was told something about the learning community and given a packet of information. I was also told that my teaching style was compatible with the learning community concept and that I would not have to make any alterations in my teaching style or the content of my course. I found the students evidenced no more closeness than would be expected in any other class. When discussing this with the students at the end of the semester, however, they said that what they liked best about the class was the fact that the students all got to know one another. I found retention to be a problem since several students did not finish the semester. This may not have as much to do with the learning community but more with the individual students. In fact, the learning community may have indeed aided retention; this is something that can be verified only with a specific study of this question.” (F3)

#### Question # 2

What else stands out, in terms of observations and discoveries? What did you notice about your students, your colleagues teaching, and your own teaching?

“This semester, our learning community did bond together. I noticed that the students bonded more with other students and teachers after our first ‘social’ experience. One Friday we engaged ourselves, teachers and students, in making sandwiches for the homeless. Perhaps it was the casual



atmosphere or perhaps it was the unification which occurred because we were working together on a common goal outside of the academic environment, but somehow I felt that my relationship changed with the students after that experience, and I noticed that their relationships with one another also changed. We became more comfortable and more casual in our interactions with one another.” (F5)

“Each learning community is unique, as unique as the individuals in it. And that is what sets apart learning communities from regular classes: my view of the students as individuals with individual personalities, concerns, and needs, is magnified. Even when students stopped attending, I knew enough about their backgrounds and attitudes to know precisely why. For example, one student stopped attending when she could no longer continue to travel home from New Jersey following weekends in North Carolina, where she had to serve as executor to her late brother's estate and guardian to his child. I believe, based on conversations with her and on her passing course work, that she, in fact, ‘hung on’ as long as she could precisely because of the feeling of being part of a group.” (F2)

“There were several students who did not complete the semester. Several students did not complete because of the magnitude of the personal problems that they were facing including pregnancy, financial crisis, and serious health issues. Then, there were a few who may have dropped out simply because they realized that they were not going to pass; I believe these particular students hung in longer than they would have because they were part of the learning community. There was also one young woman in the learning community (with a one-year-old child) who became homeless towards the end of the semester. She

continued to come to class and to finish the semester with a “B” average in my class.”

(F5)

“I have been disheartened to observe this particular group’s behavior toward one another on occasion: the insulting comments, the demeaning jokes, the sniping and bickering. Yet, they continued to work with one another, to socialize, and to help one another for the most part. I even attempted an intervention that formalized rules for classroom behavior, an exercise with which they cooperated but which they later revealed they had felt was unnecessary and patronizing. I wondered how they could treat each other inconsiderately and take each other for granted yet remain committed to the learning community. I have concluded that they function very much like an average family: secure enough in their belonging to the unit that they could dispense with the artificial pleasantries we must extend to casual acquaintances.” (F2)

“Somehow, however, amidst the complaining, the students were feeling that they were a part of something, a part of something good. They began to perform better on their writing. They began to see me as a friend, a consultant, part of the group, but ultimately they began to hold themselves more responsible for their own mistakes rather than trying to blame an authority figure.” (F5)

“I noticed that my colleague and I stress interaction, active learning and metacognitive student reflection. To be honest, I also noticed that I teach often by rote – I’ve used activities over the years, honed them, and now am really too dependent on them. Next year I think I will try to shake things up a bit more. I realize that a low level class needs different things – I should have done more circle work and modeling of good writing.” (F1)

“There were a large number of learning disabled students in the class (perhaps the majority of students fell into this category.) It seems that learning disabled students were encouraged to register for this class. The levels of the students were very low, to the point where one had to be asked to withdraw from the class because she was unable to cope with the work. We had asked the students to keep a class journal to be passed between the two classes. The students made very few entries and then stopped carrying the journal back and forth.” (F3)

“The bonding between the teachers in this learning community was invigorating to my teaching. While one teacher was a part time teacher, she was willing to share insights about the students. Sometimes, it was difficult to find time with her since she was operating under the demands that most part time teachers are, running from one institution to another. The other teacher in the learning community was not only a pleasure to work with but also stimulated my teaching. I truly enjoyed the facet of the learning community which allowed me to work cooperatively with other teachers and to escape the isolation of the classroom which many teachers experience.” (F5)

“Another benefit of the learning community is that I have gained insight and new practices from my fellow teachers. A colleague who was part of an earlier learning community suggested using a classroom journal, one in which any of us could write, and I have continued to use that in each of the learning communities of which I have been a part since. As in the past the opportunity to discuss content, methodology, and individual student progress with a colleague has been invaluable. This alone, and the way that it energizes my teaching, is worth the extra

time and effort of teaching in a learning community.” (F2)

“I had hoped we would be able to integrate more of the assignments in the two classes. This was not possible, but is something I would like to consider in the future. My own teaching style is student centered, and this was not altered.” (F3)

### Question # 3

What issues need attention in the future: what might future learning community teaching teams consider?

What might the institution consider and address?

“Along with the comfort level, however, sometimes came the type of verbal banter that could be construed as outspoken or rude. I occasionally felt uncomfortable hearing the students say unkind things about other students or teachers in the community.” (F5)

“I do have some concerns, though. One problem arose from scheduling three, one-hour-and –fifteen-minute courses back-to-back. Most days, by the time they arrived in my class, the third, they were already overwhelmed from the energy and concentration they had needed for the first two. Also, sometimes students attended the first two and then left campus. Another problem resulted from linking the developmental course to a college-level course for which they were unprepared. For example, the students were unable to satisfactorily complete a research paper for the Psychology course, and they recently confided to me that none of them had read the Psychology textbook. However, the most critical problem is with administration of the learning community: delay in assigning faculty and notifying them; lack of communication between administration and counseling staff as well as between

administration and the Psychology department; delays in financial compensation and reimbursement; and delays in creating a learning community for Fall 2000 into which this group could continue (as per their request). These matters must be addressed if learning communities are to be successful in the future.” (F2)

“The institution might have set times for teacher interaction, a stipend and expectation of some summer work. I think a midterm social is good, but this group was not into it. Maybe a set time for them to meet with a tutor as break away groups would have worked.” (F1)

“Advisors should be made aware of the requirements for placement in these classes, and these restrictions need to be observed. Although the learning community class is a good venue for PACS students, they would probably be better served in PACS learning community classes. I think that it would be beneficial for all the instructors involved in a learning community to be present at the first class meeting to establish learning community guidelines and also to establish parity among the instructors. It would also be interesting to have the last session as a joint debriefing session on the learning community experience. Also, the learning community is a very positive experience and should be promoted as such by the administration. It serves as an anchor for some students who might not otherwise feel affiliated with the college. Many of these students are personally adrift and searching for their role in both college and life. It appears that the learning community creates a sense of unity which can foster commitment to the college experience.” (F3)

#### Question # 4

As a result of teaching in this program, what will you take forward in your work?

"I believe that learning communities are valuable to our institution, and like people each learning community will have its own personality. Judging from the students' response to learning communities this semester, I believe that we should continue to promote this type of learning environment. My reasoning stems from the most frequently asked question that the students posed during our last class – 'What learning community classes can I sign up for next semester?'" (F5)

"Sometimes a student will have a different attitude or present herself differently in another course with another teacher, and talking about her with that teacher will give me a fresh perspective. Or another teacher might have a different observation about a particular encounter between people in a classroom, some explanation for people's reaction to one another that I hadn't considered. One of my favorite practices that I implemented as a result of this project was a new approach to reviewing graded exams, which I adapted from the practice of another teacher in this community. By letting the students work in small groups with their graded exams to produce a group version, all students are engaged and they see more clearly why their answers were correct or incorrect. I would never have acquired this valuable tool if it weren't for this experience." (F2)

"I will always recognize that it is useful to interact with colleagues, to talk about my teaching and students, on a regular basis. I will try to keep from getting stale. I think I will do more modeling next semester. I will try to integrate more assignments, hopefully having time this summer with the other LC teachers to do that." (F1)

"I am always reflective about each class and each teaching experience. I think that the

learning community points out the value of cooperative education. I found that my initial experience with the learning community was just that – an initial experience. To fully refine the experience, I would need further opportunities to teach in a learning community. I certainly would like to participate in another learning community; the experience was a very useful and provocative one for me.” (F3)

## Appendix O

To:

From: Jane Weber

Date: March 28, 2000

Re: Learning Communities Focus Group

As part of my doctoral dissertation research, I am conducting four focus groups to secure data concerning student, faculty, and administrative attitudes and perspectives on learning communities.

I would like you to participate in the administrative focus group scheduled for Tuesday, April 25<sup>th</sup> at 1:00 p.m. in the Teaching and Learning Center. Marilyn Feingold will moderate the session. Both Marilyn and I are excited about this opportunity to generate some qualitative data that can help the Camden County College learning community initiative.

A lunch will precede the focus group at 12:30 p.m. Please let me know if you will be able to participate in my doctoral research. Thank you.



**To: Focus Group Administrators**  
**From: Jane Weber**

**Date: April 19, 2000**

**Re: Focus Group**

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the focus group on Learning Communities. As a reminder, the focus group will take place next Tuesday, April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2000. It will be held in the Teaching and Learning Center at 1:00 p.m. and will last for one hour. A luncheon will be served prior to the session at 12:30 p.m. Again, I thank you for your willingness to participate. See you on Tuesday.



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